

Uprising

by SergeantLawson

Category: Half-Life

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Alyx V., Barney C., Gordon F., OC

Status: Completed

Published: 2014-04-01 16:09:59

Updated: 2015-11-12 23:26:33

Packaged: 2016-04-26 21:13:42

Rating: T

Chapters: 16

Words: 64,773

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: "We are no soldiers; to kill we wish not, But freedom we gain, if we take the shot." -Anonymous Resistance Fighter. Buckle up, kid. This is NOT your average Half-Life 2 novelization. Check your weapons at the door and come on in!

1. Point Insertion

Chapter 1: Point Insertion

AUTHOR'S NOTE: For those of you who don't know me (practically everyone), I'm new to this side of the fanfiction scene. I have read plenty of fics myself, mostly Star Fox and Mass Effect with a bit of Half-Life on the side. However, writing one myself is still unexplored territory, so reviews are highly appreciated whether they are full of praise or brimming with spiteful pessimism. As for this fic itself, it's a full book that tells the story of Half-Life 2 from a more personal and involved perspective. I'm writing this in first person so you guys can tell what Gordon is thinking; I even gave him a voice (please don't cut my tongue out with a meat thermometer). I am also going to introduce numerous OC's on both sides and give the other side's perspective on the war. There will be several differences from the actual game along the way (it wouldn't be fanfiction otherwise), but hopefully none too drastic. Please note: "We Don't Go to Ravenholm" has been removed in order to keep the violence at an upper-T rating, and "Highway 17" and "Sand Traps" will be combined into one chapter (still called "Highway 17") to make the story move faster. Again, thanks so much for reading!

An eerie voice in my head cut into my dreams. "Wake up, Mr. Freeman," the voice said in a slow, patient manner, "Not to imply that you have been sleeping on the job. Certainly no one is more deserving of a rest than you." Images flashed through my subconscious, memories of the Black Mesa Incident, "No doubt all the effort in the world would have gone to waste until" well, let's just say your hour has come again." More images flashed into my brain, but this time of the

Combine Citadel. "The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world. So, wake up, Mr. Freeman" wake up and smell the ashes."

I gasped and sat upright, realizing that the voice was that of my old administrator at Black Mesa. Now he was the Combine's leader on Earth. Of course, he wasn't in the train car with me. He was nice and cozy in his office on the top floor of the Combine Citadel, which I would get my first glimpse of soon.

"Hey, I didn't see you get on." I jumped in surprise at the hand on my shoulder, but it was just another citizen.

"Transferred from another car." I quickly replied as the train slowed to a stop at what appeared to be the last station.

"Well," the citizen said as he picked up his briefcase and stepped onto the platform, "End of the line, friend."

"So it is" I mused as I saw the Combine President's face on an unnecessarily large plasma monitor, welcoming us to 'City 17, one of our finest remaining urban establishments.' It was a prison camp that looked like a city. As I caught up to the man whom I had spoken to on the train, a Civil Protection officer stopped him, waving his Stunstick. Civil Protection was the image of fear for these poor citizens. Their faces were hidden under white gas masks with polarized lenses and voice filters so you couldn't tell who they were. Anyone could be an undercover CP agent. They were clad in black, their torsos covered in Kevlar, and their weapon of choice, the Stunstick, could deliver 10,000 volts of electric shock from the slightest contact with human skin or clothing.

"What's in the bag?" the CP officer demanded in the filtered, robotic drawl of all Combine forces.

"Clothes," the man replied, "A couple of spare sets of civvies, that's it."

"Show me." the CP officer pointed his Stunstick at the briefcase.

The citizen opened the briefcase, and there was only a spare set of civvies, just like he had said. Something slipped out of his pocket as he bent over to pick up the briefcase; it looked like a blank slip of paper.

"What is that?" the CP officer inquired.

"It's nothing." the man went to pick the slip of paper up. The CP officer stepped on his wrist, and grabbed the paper before the other man could. He unfolded it, and there was a Greek Lambda symbol on the inside. It was the symbol of the Resistance.

"Resistance!" the officer yelled, and clubbed the man in the face with his Stunstick. Four CP officers seemingly came out of nowhere and dragged him away. I kept walking. I wanted to fight them, but there was no way I would win without a weapon. As I neared the security checkpoint, I heard some guy telling me not to drink the water, that they put something in it to make you forget how you got here. I thanked him, and stepped up to the screening area. Instantly,

the gates shut in front of and behind me. A camera popped out of its slot in the wall, and started taking pictures.

Do they know who I am? I thought to myself.

A CP officer came through a door marked "Security," and said, "You, citizen. Come with me."

Shit.

As I followed him down the hallway, I heard a familiar voice. It was the man from the train; his voice was coming from the room next to me. He was strapped to a chair, being interrogated by two CP officers.

"This must be a mistake," he stammered, terrified, "I've got an immigration pass just like everyone else." Before I could hear any more, one of the CP officers slid the shutter over the viewing slot in the door. Once again, I kept walking, cursing myself for not being able to do anything to help him. The CP officer led me into the adjacent room. I didn't like what I saw. An interrogation chair with dried blood on the wall behind it, and a security console on the other side of the room. Another CP officer was already in the room.

"Need any help with this one?" he asked.

"No, I'm good." my original escort replied. I was surprised to say the least, and I was even more confused when he shut off the security cameras.

"I'm going to need some privacy for this," he said while chuckling to himself. I knew I could take him down if it was just the two of us. I was about to jump on him when he pulled his mask off.

"Now about that beer I owe youâ€¦" he said. I froze. It was Barney Calhoun, my old partner at Black Mesa.

"My God," I said, letting out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding, "You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry for the scare Gordon, but I had to put on a show for the cameras; I'm way down on my beating quota. I've been working undercover with Civil Protection and I've been feeding intel to the Resistance for months. Hold on a sec." He punched in a code on the security console, and the screen was filled with yet another familiar face. Dr. Isaac Kleiner, another survivor of the Black Mesa Incident.

"Yes, Barney, what is it? I'm very pressed for time." Kleiner said in his usual nasal tone and impatient manner.

"Hey, Doc, I've got a guest for you," Barney replied, and stepped aside to let me into Kleiner's field of view.

"Great Scott! It's Gordon Freeman!" the scientist exclaimed.

"I just saved his life. If any other CP guy had caught him, he'd be on the express to Nova Prospekt right now."

"Gordon," Kleiner turned back to me, "I need you to get to my lab as quickly as you can. I need your help with something very important."

"I'm on my way." I said.

"My lab is about two miles away from where you are now," the doctor clarified, "I'll get some Resistance members in position to periodically guide you along the way."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," I replied.

"Oh, and Gordon?" Kleiner raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah?"

"Good to see you."

"Likewise, Kleiner."

Just a few seconds after Barney cut the vid link; there was a loud pounding at the door. The smile instantly disappeared from Barney's face.

"Aw, man, that's just what I was afraid of! Get out of here, Gordon, before you blow my cover!"

"How?"

"Back door!" Barney replied as he punched in the combo for the lock. I didn't say anything; I just walked through the doorway as he told me what to do, "Climb the ladder, then jump out the window. You might need to stack a few crates to reach it." He shut the door, and I started climbing. Barney was right about the window, it was seven feet off the ground. I pulled over an empty crate or two to get a better view. Fortunately, I saw a perfect path down. I jumped for it, grabbed onto a fire escape ladder on the other side of the alley, and climbed as far down as I could. There was still a large enough drop to make me worry, so I jumped across the alley again, landing on my side against a dumpster. I rolled off of it and onto the ground. Making sure to look completely calm, natural, and to give any CP units a wide berth, I walked out into the street. The Combine President's voice was soft but persistent, and it was always in your head whenever you walked outside. The loudspeakers were bad enough, but the Combine had installed two-hundred-inch plasma monitors all around the city to magnify the effects.

"I understand that some of you may have questions which need answering," he continued blithely spitting Combine propaganda, "When will the Combine turn off the Suppression Field and allow us to reproduce? To fully understand the intentions of the Combine, one must view them as our benefactors, not our oppressors. To better ourselves as a species, we must push past our primal instincts. The Combine has given us the tools to succeed in this task, and the Suppression Field is one of them. To advance as a species, to achieve the next phase of our evolution, we must forget one of our most troubling urges: the urge to reproduce. For the first time, as a species, immortality is within our grasp." I wasn't even listening, I was doing my best to shut the voice out, but it still clung to my brain like a tumor.

As I rounded a corner, I saw two citizens standing out in the cold, shivering. I decided that even if I couldn't make things better for them, I could at least ease my own conscience by offering them some form of comfort. We were all human beings, we were all in this together, and I would help whomever I could, no matter who they were.

"Is anything wrong here?" I asked as I approached them.

"What do you want?" one of them snapped, "We have enough problems."

"I'm sorry," I said as I turned to walk away, "I just wanted to see if I could help a fellow citizen."

"Sir," the other guy put a hand on my shoulder, "Please excuse my friend. We're just a little on edge; Civil Protection is tightening security lately."

"It's alright," I said, turning around and facing them again, "We're all in the same hole, right?"

"I guess so," the first guy said, "They're raiding some of the apartments in the building; it's hitting a lot closer to home than the other raids."

"What?" my heart rate quickened, "They're raiding the apartment building?"

"Yeah," his friend replied, "Something about a citywide crackdown. They're calling itâ€|" he struggled to remember the name, "I think it wasâ€| 'Lambda Locator?' Yeah, that's it!"

I felt a cold sweat break out on the back of my neck, "Do you know what a Lambda is?"

"Isn't it a Greek symbol or something?" the first guy took a guess.

"Yes, it is," I confirmed, "But it's also the symbol of the Resistance."

The two citizens froze. One of them put an arm around my shoulder. "It's not safe to use that word in City 17."

"Trust me," I said in a solid tone, "The Lambda will topple the Citadel."

"Oh my God," his eyes popped open wide, "You're Gordon Freeman."

His friend eyed a CP officer who was getting a bit too curious for his liking. "Come on," he led me toward the apartment building's door. He opened the door, but didn't go in with me. "That CP unit knows who you are. He's already called it in, so there are probably at least two dozen backup officers converging on this building. Go up the stairs for two flights, and then head to room 305. Knock six times and they should let you in. Tell them they're about to be overrun and they'll lead you to their escape route."

All I could say was, "Thank you." These two men whom I had only known for all of sixty seconds were about to sacrifice their lives for me.

I followed the man's instructions to the letter, and sure enough, someone pulled me through the door.

I cut right to the chase, "Civil Protection is about to bust down this door. You need to get out of here now."

The woman who pulled me through the door didn't seem convinced. "And why should we trust you?"

I looked her dead in the eyes, "Because I'm Gordon Freeman."

Everybody in the room froze and turned to get a look at me. Looks of hope glimmered in their eyes for what was probably the first time in months. The Resistance was falling apart, but I was going to change that. A loud pounding on the door and robotic, drawling radio chatter ruined the moment.

"Go," she said, "Through the door on the far side of the room. Head up the stairs and to the roof; we laid out some planks between this building and the next one. Walk across them, turn left, and stick to the wall. Go through the open window, down the stairs, and to the elevator."

"I'm on it," I said, "And thank yâ€"

"_Go!"_ she said as the lead CP officer kicked in the door. The door flew off of its hinges and slammed into her, knocking her to the floor. Four Civil Protection agents swarmed into the room, indiscriminately shooting everybody. In just a few short seconds, the only one left was the woman who had challenged me when I first entered the room. She was just now pushing herself off of the floor, dazed and injured. One of the CP officers raised his weapon. He was about to fire when a voice from outside the room stopped him.

"No!" the man said as he walked into the room.

"Commissioner Thorn, sir!" the CP agents snapped off salutes as he entered. He wore a CP uniform, but he was unmasked. Only Combine officers and high-up Civil Protection didn't wear masks. The Combine may be a faceless enemy, but they wanted their upper echelon to instill fear. Fear was best associated with faces, and this particular man exemplified that. He carried a .357 magnum, a powerful sidearm reserved for only the most experienced Civil Protection officers. The quadruple golden stripes on his left sleeve denoted his position as City 17's police commissioner. He was a raven-haired, blue-eyed, heartless son of a bitch with a scraggly scar that began just under his left eye and traced itself over his nose to his right cheekbone. He pulled out his revolver and pointed it at the back of the woman's neck, preparing to deliver an execution shot. Just as he was about to fire, something evil shone in his eyes and he second-guessed the shot. He holstered his revolver, grabbed her by the throat, and dragged her over to the window.

He lifted her off of the ground, snarled, and said, "The Resistance shall fall."

Something snapped inside me. Maybe it was the desire to eliminate a high-value target, or maybe it was hatred for the Combine. Either way, I was not going to stand on the sidelines and watch the Combine murder another human being again. Ever.

I quietly grabbed the kitchen knife that was lying on the table in front of me. Silently approaching the Civil Protection team, I pulled the nearest officer down to the floor and drove the knife through the left lens of his mask. At the same time, I wrenched the officer's sidearm from his grip.

The Five-seveN was the standard-issue weapon of all Civil Protection officers. The weapon carried a twenty round magazine and fired 5.7mm rounds. Its high rate of fire coupled with its accuracy and stopping power made it a formidable weapon against groups of enemies.

I didn't have time to engage any of the other CP officers, so I turned the gun on the commissioner. A look of shock and hate registered on his face as he realized whom he was facing.

"Gordon Freeman!" he shouted. Glaring into his eyes, I fired twice. His body armor ensured that neither of the slugs caused any damage, but they did knock the wind out of him and cause him to drop the Resistance woman. That was all I needed.

"Come on!" I hoisted her off the floor and started pulling her along behind me. We ran up the stairs to the roof. Another Resistance fighter shut the door behind us as soon as we stepped onto the roof.

"Don't worry about me," the fighter said as he ushered us across the roof, "Just keep going!" He pressed himself against the wall right next to the door. He was holding a section of lead pipe in his hand, intending to use it as a last-ditch weapon. He showed no mercy to the CP officer that bashed down the door, swinging the pipe into the back of his head. Something snapped, and the officer went down. We had barely made it across the roof when we started hearing sporadic pistol shots. A couple of rounds whizzed by so close to my ear that I could hear the wind whistling. It unnerved me a little, but I kept my composure. We were on the other side of the roof, and the gap to the adjacent building was only six or seven feet wide.

"Jump for it!" I said as I leaped across the gap. I felt something hot slice across my wrist right before we landed.

Damn, I thought, _Lucky shot._ We kept running; the door was just a few feet away. I heard a helicopter, which only made me run faster. The only good thing was that Civil Protection had stopped shooting because we were out of range. Only now they were bringing in more guys, right on top of us by the looks of it. I opened the roof access door and we ran inside. Boots were thudding along the roof as we ran down the stairs.

"Are you okay?" I said over my shoulder.

"Yeah," the woman replied, "I'm fine; I just need to catch my breath." She sounded terrified, but relieved that I was there. I must mean a lot to these people.

"I'll go check out the next room, and then I'll come back for you."

She noticed the spot where the bullet had nicked my wrist. "Gordon, your armâ€|"

"I'm fine," I replied, "it just grazed me."

"If you say so," she still sounded concerned.

"I'll be right back," I said as I opened the door. The room was empty, save for a concrete pillar in the middle. There were two wide empty window frames on the far end of the room, and there was a door on either side. I had barely closed the door behind me when two Civil Protection agents roped in through the empty window frames.

One of them pulled his Stunstick and said, "Target spotted, moving in." His partner drew his Five-seven. I didn't have time to pull out my own weapon, so I made a run for the door to my right. A third CP officer kicked the door open right in front of me. I spun around and ran for the other door, but two more officers bashed it down and moved in. I was completely surrounded. Grimacing, I raised my hands.

"On your knees," commanded one of the officers. I complied, struggling to think of a way out of this mess. The answer came when my Resistance friend tackled one of the CP agents and threw an uppercut into his jaw, knocking him out cold. I took the moment of confusion to knee the officer in front of me in the groin. As he bent over in pain, I kicked him in the face and put him out of the fight. Another CP officer came at me from the right with his Stunstick. I turned to face him and crescent kicked him in the side of the head, sending him flying headfirst into the concrete wall. A fourth agent came out of nowhere and grabbed me in a headlock. I struggled to escape, but my partner lent a hand by jabbing a fallen officer's Stunstick into his right armpit, sending him to the floor.

"Hey, he was mine," I complained.

"Gotta be quicker next time," she winked at me.

Now there was only one left.

He went for his radio. I charged at him, but he still managed to get a warning off.

"Target is armed and dangerous, request reinforcement!"

Thankfully, he was stupid enough to try to pull his Stunstick.

I decided to give him a chance. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," I growled. He came at me anyway, swinging his Stunstick like a madman. I grabbed his wrist and squeezed the tendons, forcing him to drop the Stunstick. I ripped off his mask and stared him dead in the eyes.

"This is for every person you have killed, hurt, and dehumanized," I said with malice. I raised my right fist, put as much force behind it as I could, and punched him square in the nose, knocking him unconscious and flat on his ass.

"Thanks," I said as I turned to the Resistance woman.

"No problem," she said, "I'm Alyx, by the way."

"Alyx?" I racked my brain for a few seconds to put the pieces together, "As in Alyx Vance?"

"Bingo!" she smiled.

"Isn't Eli Vance your father?"

"So you've heard of him," she nodded, "He's the leader of the Resistance. And he's very interested in speaking with you."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Well there we go, my first chapter polished and ready for the showroom. Go out and make me proud, buddy! Commissioner Thorn is one of the OC's I talked about earlier, and I plan to make him Gordon's nemesis of sorts. I have some dark and nasty things planned for the Commissioner, but I'm not saying anything else for now :). I know some of you will complain about how I introduced Alyx in a completely different way and how I made the hand-to-hand fight completely different as well, but those are a couple of the changes I mentioned (scroll to top if you don't recall). I hope you guys enjoyed the first chapter nonetheless; we're only just getting started here!

Cheers,

SergeantLawson

2. A Red Letter Day

Chapter 2: A Red Letter Day

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Welcome to chapter two! I don't really have much to say about this one. So, uh... enjoy? :/

Alyx hit the button on the cargo lift. The elevator lurched, and we started descending. The ride down was awkwardly silent, as if we both expected Civil Protection to start cutting through the roof at any moment. When we reached the bottom we both relaxed, and Alyx started chattering up a storm.

"So?" she began in an attempt to make conversation, "my father was one of your co-workers at Black Mesa, right?"

"Yes," I briefly replied.

"You remember him from Black Mesa, don't you?" she said as we stopped in front of a faded poster of the Combine President with the Combine insignia in the background. I held back the urge to spit on it. I must have looked fairly pissed off, because Alyx shook her head and chuckled when she looked at me. "Don't get my dad started on Dr. Breen," she said as she pried open a power box. At least it looked like a power box. Closer inspection revealed a tiny black button that should not have been there. When Alyx pushed it, the wall behind the poster split, revealing a hidden passageway.

"Nice," I commented whilst running my hand along the bricks, "This panel is seamless."

"You can thank Izzy for that," replied Alyx, referring to Dr. Kleiner's nickname. Barney had come up with it for the express purpose of getting under the doctor's skin, and it had not failed him yet.

We kept walking, Alyx making the occasional comment as she guided me through the labyrinth of passageways. This place was a maze; it was obviously designed with the intent of buying any Resistance personnel inside some time to escape if Civil Protection ever found the fake wall panel.

At some point she had brought up City 17's 'railway system,' a Resistance operation with the intention of getting people out of the cities and to Resistance bases and outposts. City 17's exodus route was one of the most dangerous, but it did lead to the most heavily fortified Resistance base: Black Mesa East. It was the birthplace of the Resistance, and while the Combine knew of its location, they had no idea what was going on inside. "For years we've had to send citizen after citizen through the railway system, and we don't know how many of them died trying to get through. Today we're finally on the verge of having a better way."

Eventually we stopped again, this time by a vending machine. "What's going to happen this time," I asked sarcastically, "Is the vending machine going to pop out of the wall?" Alyx elbowed me in the side. Surprisingly, it did exactly what I expected. Alyx inserted a quarter into the vending machine, it spat the change back out, and the vending machine swung aside like a door. Behind it was Kleiner's lab.

"Ah, there you are, Gordon," Kleiner made no attempt for a handshake; he was a bit antisocial.

"So, doc, what's this big project I've been hearing about?" I asked.

Kleiner opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. His hesitance told me it was probably something to do with the Black Mesa Incident.

"It's okay, doc," I reassured him, "You can tell me."

He relaxed. "Very well, Gordon, but you won't like it. Do you remember the teleporter from your old job at Black Mesa?"

"I do," I answered, "It nearly killed me, left Black Mesa in ruins, allowed the Combine to take over Earth, and left our planet under a terror state. So, about this teleporterâ€¦"

"Eh, wellâ€¦" Kleiner shied away a little, "I believe I have finally perfected it. And this time we have a direct, closed link between two nodes. No unknowns or variables this time, Gordon. I promise."

"Okay," this offered me virtually no comfort, "So what's the destination?"

"Black Mesa East," the scientist replied.

While I was still processing all of this, Barney came running into the lab. "Damn, Gordon, you really stirred up the hive. Overwatch is looking everywhere for you!"

Kleiner raised a finger, "All the more reason why we need to get him out of City 17!"

"Well since he's not taking the canals, we might as well get him out of his civvies," Barney suggested.

"Well what am I going to change into?" I asked.

"Gordon, I have a present for you," Kleiner said all-knowingly as he walked over to a door and punched in the combination.

Barney stood by the door and jerked his thumb towards the side room, "You'll never guess what's in here."

When Kleiner opened the door, a headcrab jumped out and latched onto Barney's face. He immediately started grabbing at it, desperately trying to pull it away.

"Ow, dammit, get it off me!" he said as the headcrab continued scratching at his face. Alyx did her best not to laugh, but seeing Barney humiliated was just too amusing to bear.

"Lamarr, come here!" Kleiner attempted to entice the headcrab away from Barney's head. Eventually, the headcrab complied, but it didn't hesitate giving Barney an angry hiss along the way.

"I thought you got rid of that pest!" Barney glared at Dr. Kleiner.

Kleiner ignored him, and bent his head down, "Up here, my pet. Hop up." The headcrab completely ignored him, instead leaping up onto the loft above Kleiner. He tried in vain to calm his pet down, "Lamarr, no! Those are quite fragile!" he said just before everyone in the room heard delicate and expensive-sounding things breaking.

"Oh, dear!" the doctor seemed physically wounded by the disappearance of his pet headcrab, "Now it will take me a week to coax her out of there!"

"Longer, if we're lucky," Barney muttered under his breath.

Alyx raised an eyebrow at him, "Not an animal person, Barney?"

He shivered and shook his head. I made a mental note to find out why he hated animals so much.

"Gordon," Kleiner turned back to me, "Why don't you try on your HEV Suit now?"

I complied, slipping into the Black Mesa Anti-Radiation and Hazardous Environments Suit. Everyone called it the HEV for short. The suit provides head-to-toe protection to the wearer, isolating him or her from almost any environmental conditions. The heating and cooling gel that ran the length of the suit not only provided flexibility

retention and support, but also comfort from all but the most extreme weather conditions. A heads-up display, or HUD, was housed inside the helmet's visor. The HUD provides a host of information, and the option to turn off certain HUD features allows for a wider and less cluttered field of vision. The only things I kept on the HUD were the essentials: vital statistics, suit charge level, and supply levels. The supply levels feature adjusted to whatever the user was currently holding. If I were holding a battery-powered accessory, the readout would give me the amount of remaining power, as well as projected usage time before the object ran dead. The only reason I keep it on my HUD was because of something I found out accidentally during the Black Mesa Incident: if the user was holding a firearm, the readout would scan the inside of the gun and the length of the suit, and display the amount of ammunition left in the current magazine, as well as any extra ammunition the user was carrying. This had proven essential to my survival. The vital statistics were a bit trippy with the previous version of the HEV Suit, the Mk IV, because they only displayed a color-coded bar: green, yellow, orange, red, or black, depending on the user's health and injuries. The new HEV Mk V Suit, which I was currently wearing, had made some major improvements in that particular department. Now the display was divided into three categories, one above the other: circulatory, nervous, and oxygenic. The circulatory functions monitored my blood flow, the nervous functions monitored my nervous system and kept a close lookout for any seizures or neurotoxins, and the oxygenic functions monitored my body's oxygen intake to ensure I was getting enough air. On top of that, the medical systems were amazing. If I suffered a serious flesh wound, fracture, or other injury, the suit would inject morphine into the injured area and begin administering short-term medical procedures, numbing the pain and allowing me to keep fighting. The neurotoxin defense mechanisms had saved my life countless times against the Combine's chemical and biological weapons. Hell, they had even added a radiation detector. Another thing that had proven useful was the suit's shielding systems. The suit had been rigged to siphon power from Combine energy chargers, which in turn powered the suit's shields. The shields had originally been designed to block minor amounts of radiation and other hazardous materials, but my experience against the Combine had revealed that the shields were also very good at blocking or dramatically slowing projectiles, especially bullets. Even if a round punched through my shields, it would have been slowed enough to not have much of an effect.

"I see your HEV Suit still fits you like a gloveâ€¦ at least, the glove parts do," Kleiner remarked in an attempt at a joke that didn't quite land. He paused for a moment, then continued, "Anyway, let me acquaint you with the basics. Ahemâ€¦" Dr. Kleiner began reading from an instruction manual, "The Mk V Hazardous Environment Suit has been redesigned for comfort and utilityâ€¦" he furrowed his brows and took a closer look at the page he was reading from, "Oh, dear; this is rather complicated. Now, Gordon, listen carefullyâ€¦"

"Hang on a second, doc," Barney held up a hand and adjusted the volume on his radio so everyone could hear.

The female British tone of the Sector 17 Overwatch Voice was on the other end of the receiver, "Attention, Protection Team. Elusive suspect has de-serviced several Protection Units. Suspect identification: Freeman. Status: Extremely dangerous. Use of lethal force authorized. Terminate suspect on sight. Overwatch out."

The mood in Kleiner's lab darkened, and it only soured more when we heard the reply, "Overwatch, this is Commissioner Thorn. Orders received and understood. Relaying orders to Protection Team leaders. Citywide sweep will commence immediately. Primary sweep unit: City Scanners. All available units will retaliate with lethal force as instructed upon suspect detection. Overwatch, how copy?"

"City 17 Commissioner, Overwatch copies all. Overwatch out."

"Solid copy, Overwatch. Commissioner Thorn out."

Kleiner instantly cut to the chase. "Gordon, the teleporter leaves a distinct energy signature when activated. If we activate it once, the Combine will notice the particle shift, but they will not know its location. If we activate it twice, the Combine will lock on to its coordinates and send every CP unit in City 17 our way!"

I managed to guess what he was thinking, "So you're saying one of us gets to go through the teleporter, while the other has to take the canals?"

"Precisely."

Barney tapped me on the shoulder. "Gordon, I have to get back on my shift. If Civil Protection didn't know I was gone before, they'll definitely know if I'm not where I should be sixty seconds from now." He sprinted off, not waiting for a reply.

"I'll go through the Canals," I said flatly, but Alyx wouldn't have it.

"No!" she protested, "I know City 17 like the back of my hand, and you're far too valuable to the Resistance."

"Alyx," I took on an oddly soft tone, "I have my HEV Suit, so I'll have a much better chance of survival. Even if I think I'm getting lost, there are definitely going to be Resistance outposts along the way to guide me along. And if I'm going to make any difference in this war, I can't be taking the easy route. We need to send a message to the Combine. We need to meet them head-on, knock them down and make sure they don't get back up. The Uprising won't start until we do something big, and this could be it. And if nothing else, I've been dying to knock some CP heads together."

Alyx stayed rooted to the ground for what felt like hours, but finally she said, "Fine, but be careful. If you get yourself killed I'm going to be pissed."

"I'm always careful, aren't I?" I said with a grin as I opened the door and walked out into the sunlight. I had barely walked ten meters before some eagle-eyed CP officer spotted me, radioed for backup, and started shooting.

Why does everybody hate the guy with the glasses? I asked myself as I drew my Five-seven.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: So that's chapter two banged out (12-year-olds laugh). I tried to leave this one unaltered, so I hope I did a good job. Don't worry, the shit's gonna hit the fan and splatter everywhere as soon as chapter three starts. As always, reviews are

appreciated.

Cheers,

SergeantLawson

3. Route Kanal

Chapter 3: Route Kanal

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Ahh, back at the keyboard. You guys have no idea how good it feels to stare at a screen two feet from my face for hours on end while my ass goes numbâ€¦ alright, who am I kidding? I'm back, everyone! I know it's been a while, but I came through again. I could have made this chapter about four pages longer with all the combat material I originally wrote, but after reading through it a few times I cut about 30% of it from the final version; it just became repetitive. I've made some changes to the HEV suit's HUD as you will see, but I haven't made it completely back-asswards. Enjoy the chapter; tally up a kill count while you're at it!

I was hiding behind a crumbled brick wall while some Metrocop took potshots at me. The brick wall protected me from his shots; he was only using a Five-seveN. The pistol only fired 5.7mm rounds, so even if a round got through the brick wall it would barely have an effect. However, I realized that my moment of safety would be short-lived, as the guy had already radioed for backup. More firepower would be thrown against me, and they would pick my cover and I apart. I knew I couldn't stay here either, because the fresh CPs would probably come in from the side, cornering and overwhelming me. I had to move, and I had to do it now.

I took a deep breath, loaded a fresh magazine into my Five-seveN, and started running. My HEV Suit's power automatically diverted auxiliary power to speed, increasing my speed by about 5 miles per hour. I was careful not to use auxiliary power unless it was absolutely necessary; its power supply was finite and ran off of Black Mesa-manufactured power cells, which were only found at Resistance compounds, bases, and outposts. On account of the Combine's heavy presence in Sector 17, Black Mesa East was the only Resistance compound in the entire Sector, aside from small mobile camps of two to ten members each. It would be an interesting challenge to make it through the Canals on just one battery, but if anyone could do it, I could. Besides, my friends in black would provide all the entertainment I needed.

I made it across the clearing without taking any hits from the CP guy on the bridge; they were generally inexperienced in firefights. I paused before continuing on, and decided to take him down. The mere thought of the indiscriminate beatings Civil Protection conducted on a daily basis was enough to make me pull the trigger. I usually tried to be careful about killing CP agents, because about ten percent of them were forced into service. This time around, I wouldn't be. Commissioner Thorn wouldn't send unwilling conscripts to track down the person they hoped would save them; he would send his best men. Besides, if this guy didn't want to work for Civil Protection, he wouldn't have fired on me in the first place.

Headshots were unrealistic at this range. They may produce instant

kills in most cases, but the torso was a larger target and much easier to hit. I drew a bead and pulled the trigger. I didn't blaze away; I waited at least two seconds in between each shot. Not only did this greatly improve my accuracy, it also allowed me to get a rough estimate of how many shots it would take to punch through CP body armor and down the officer. I was very analytical and precise with every situation I confronted; it was hard-wired into my brain. Plus, it helped me conserve ammunition.

It took five shots to kill the officer. I was disappointed; now I knew I would only get three kills per magazine, four if I were lucky. As I filed this information away into my brain, my HEV Suit's shields dropped from 100 to 98. I didn't feel the impact, but I knew someone had just shot me in the back. I spun around and found myself face-to-face with a pair of Metrocops, the first of the officer's backup. I quickly dispatched them with two point-blank headshots.

Before I moved on, I made sure to pull the ammunition out of their guns and inspect their armbands to see what I was up against. Their armbands read c17:p12. The first part stood for "City 17," and the latter part stood for "Patrol 12." Patrol officers were standard CP officers, and thus of little threat to someone with my training and protection, but I didn't feel any more at ease. They were still armed, and they could still kill me.

I was walking along what appeared to be a service corridor; and I did not know what for. The floor was paved, but the large patches of moss that covered nearly its entire surface signified that it had fallen into neglect long ago. To my relief, the corridor was still lit, which meant I would not have to use valuable auxiliary power on my flashlight.

I soon reached the end of the hallway and I could see light through the crack under the heavy steel door. I knew that rushing through the door and into the sunlight would not only blind me for a few seconds, it could also get me killed even if there were any CPs behind the door. I counted to three and slowly opened the door.

When I was about to open the door all the way, I heard a familiar voice, "Patrol 12, this is Commissioner Thorn. Report your position, over."

After a few seconds, a mechanized voice replied, "Commissioner, this is Patrol 15. We are working in conjunction with Patrol 12, but we have lost contact. Presumed KIA, over."

The Commissioner took a deep breath, and then replied, "Well, then why aren't you going after them?"

The CP officer on the other end took the cue to sign off, "10-4, sir. Patrol 15 out."

"Commissioner Thorn out."

I checked my Five-seveN to make sure it was fully loaded, and pushed open the door. I didn't rush out into the line of fire like an idiot, I took cover behind the wall next to the door. As far as I could see, I was only facing down three CPs. They had obviously not had the time for a coordinated offensive, but I knew I would be facing

overwhelming odds soon enough. I needed to take down as many of them as I could before they got their act together. I poked my head around the corner to get a more precise picture on their positions. The room in front of me was square, with a second door on the opposite wall. It had no windows and was relatively barren, save for a thick concrete support beam in the center of the room, and a few tables that the CPs had turned on their sides in an attempt to form makeshift cover. One of the officers was concealed behind the beam, and the other two were behind the tables. My 5.7mm pistol couldn't hope to punch through the concrete, so I would have to leave that guy alone for now. I could deal with the other two officers, though, but I didn't want to waste even one bullet firing at the wrong table. I waited until one of them popped his head out from behind one of the tables, and I put two rounds into his head.

To my dismay, I heard the Overwatch Voice once again, "Patrol 15, unit down at Canal Station 6. All available units respond Code 3."

Damn, I thought to myself, _I'll have to finish this up quickly._ Normally I don't take unnecessary risks, but my HEV Suit was fully charged, I was uninjured, and there were only two CPs left. I took a deep breath and sprinted out into the room, which caused one of the CPs to look up. The last thing he saw was the muzzle of my gun. The last remaining officer was smart enough to stay behind his post, but he didn't count on me zigzagging to the other side of the room and connecting with a left hook. The punch knocked him down, but he wasn't out. He shot his foot out and swept my legs, landing me on my back. This time I reacted before he could, pinning him to the floor and digging my forearm into his neck. Before I could line up my Five-seveN and get a shot off, he kneed me in the groin and tried to flip me onto my back. The blow stunned me, but I knocked the wind out of him with a gunshot to the stomach. The shot didn't injure him on account of his Kevlar vest, but it made him falter, which was all I needed. I pressed my Five-seveN against the side of his mask and pulled the trigger.

I got up, dusted myself off, said, "Damage report," and listened to the tinny voice in my ears as I checked the fallen CP officers' pulses and ejected the magazines from their weapons.

/DIAGNOSTICS/

Shields: 94%

Auxiliary Power: 99%

Injuries: None

/end_report/

To most people that might seem like an excellent performance, but I would disagree. I had no idea how far I had to travel to reach Black Mesa East, but I presumed it was between thirty and fifty miles. I had barely made it 300 meters and my shields had already taken more nicks and cuts than I would have hoped; I was going to have to be extremely careful if I was going to make it through this hellhole alive.

I had taken the CPs' ammunition out of their weapons and was ready to go. I would have stayed to root through their pockets for every last bullet, but I was pressed for time, as there was God knows how many backup units closing in. I didn't run for fear of tiring myself out early on, but I wouldn't hesitate to sprint like a maniac on fire if it came down to it.

I opened the door with my left hand, held my Five-seven with my right, and started walking up the stairs. I was careful to "clear my corners" as the former US Army liked to say, which essentially meant keeping your head on a swivel and pointing your gun at all possible directions of attack. Soon this tactic paid off, giving me a clean bead on a CP squad that had gone into radio silence in an attempt to catch me off-guard. I didn't hesitate to blaze away at point-blank range, spending my entire magazine but putting down all four CPs in the process. I dropped the clip out of my pistol, inserted a fresh one, and picked through their ammo.

Before I continued any further, I realized it would be inconvenient to have to order my suit's computer to give me a detailed status update after every single firefight, so I took a few moments to adjust my HUD. I tried several different custom configurations but none of them rang true; everything I tried was either too cluttered or sparse. Just as I was about to deal with the inconvenience, I noticed a small tab in the corner of my HUD. I activated it, and it displayed a short list of recommended setups based on the user's situation. The "Emergency/Combat" option was perfect; it displayed shield levels, as well as a pop-up window that briefly appeared to inform the user of any injuries or system failures. I uploaded the settings into my HUD, checked my weapon, and kicked open the door to the train station. I stepped out onto the tracks, and bullets instantly started pinging off of train cars all around me.

Being under fire from an unknown number of enemies really put me on edge, but then something made my day. A vid link window popped up in the upper-right corner of my HUD. It was Alyx.

"They put a vid link in this thing and nobody told me?" I asked.

"Gordon, we've been trying to reach you, and the link just connected. I'll guide you through the-" She was drowned out by the sounds of wild cheering. She rolled her eyes, turned away from the screen, and shouted, "Would you keep it down! I've got Gordon Freeman on the line!"

Someone I couldn't see shouted back over the crowd, "We know, that's why we're going nuts!"

Alyx scoffed, mumbled, "Good God, give me a break," and then turned back to me, "Gordon, I'm going to put you up on our plasma monitor. We'll get a better picture of what's happening and I might get a minute of peace and quiet without these boneheads chasing after me."

I couldn't help laughing at this, but now I needed to stay focused and stay alive more than ever. I was in the eye of the Resistance now, and to see me die would almost certainly convince a large portion of its fighters to surrender. Even better, I would have some motivational support and some additional pairs of eyes.

"Gordon, I'm seeing a lot of CPs inbound to your location," Alyx commented, "I've got twentyâ€| thirtyâ€| fortyâ€| oh my God, there's at least fifty of them!"

I didn't even break a sweat. I made it this far, and I'd be damned if Civil Protection stopped me now.

"I don't believe this. There has to be at least a quarter of City 17's officers gunning straight for you. They've activated the barriers behind you, so you can't go that way," I looked behind me, and sure enough, there was a towering wall of semi-transparent non-lethal plasma containment field blocking my exit route.

"I've got good news, though," she continued, "They're spread pretty thin, so the best route would be to go straight through them. If you can isolate them into small groups, you should be able to get across the city without too much trouble. As long as you keep moving, they won't be able to attack you in force. I'll guide you through the Canals, but pay attention. Nobody has ever tried the route I'm giving you; it's been considered too dangerous. Go where I tell you to go, don't get caught up in too many firefights, and you should be fine. I'm uploading a nav point to your HUD in case we lose contact."

I was already up and running before she had finished talking. Alyx was right; they were spread fairly thin, because for the first couple of miles I only ran into CPs in groups of two and three. I checked my nav point. _Twenty-five miles to go, Gordon,_ I thought, _your shields aren't even below ninety percent; you can do this._ I was up to my ankles in dirty water; the Canals were a no-admittance area, so they had naturally fallen into disrepair.

Suddenly, a voice cried out, "Help me," I looked left and right, searching for the source. "I'm in the pipes. Is anyone out there? Please, help me!" I looked into the pipe; it was a large air duct, and someone could easily crawl through it. I turned on my suit's flashlight, squinting to see who was inside. It was a Resistance fighter. He was obviously terrified of something, but I couldn't see what. The answer came in the form of sporadic weapons fire and CP radio chatter. The poor guy didn't stand a chance; he had no armor of any kind. The bullets ripped through him like a hot knife through butter. I had started crawling through the pipe as soon as I heard the radio chatter. When the Civil Protection officers pulled the Resistance fighter's body out of the pipe, they were met with something far worse than they could have imagined.

One of the CPs covered the pipe's exit and started shooting, giving his buddies time to run for cover. I quickly dispatched him with a few shots from my Five-seveN, and pushed him away to take care of his friends. The sound of a radio crackling made me jump.

"Station Seven, do you copy?" said the voice on the other end. Combine Vocoders weren't scrambling it, and the caller sounded like he actually cared about what was happening. Plus, the radio had a Lambda spray-painted onto it.

I picked up the headset, "Station Seven was hit. I just found this place, and Civil Protection didn't leave anybody alive."

"Who are you? Identify yourself!" the caller demanded.

"The Combine's worst nightmare." I said before hanging up.

I checked the bodies for pulses and ammunition. Just as I was finishing up, I heard a mechanized groan. It scared the hell out of me; I thought there was a CP right behind me. Fortunately, it was an officer whom I had shot, but apparently failed to take down.

Sprinting over to him and keeping muzzle contact on his forehead, I said in a voice colder than I thought possible, "Why are you doing this?"

The officer reached for his radio and I shot him in the wrist, "I wouldn't do that again," I remarked while shaking my head.

"Orders," the Metrocop replied.

"What are you gaining from this?" I demanded, letting just a bit of malice seep into my tone, "What have you accomplished by doing this?"

"Destroying the Resistance," the CP said triumphantly, as if this were the only thing in life worth doing.

I tried a different approach, "Well I don't know if they've indoctrinated you into erasing your emotions, but I'm willing to bet that some of these men were your friends,"

"Squadmates. Acquaintances. Allies. Friends. Enemies. What's the difference?" the officer asked.

I took a deep breath, "Friendship, like the Resistance, is forged through time, respect, and trust, and it endures through the most blistering heat and the most frostbitten cold. Enemies, like the Combine, are held together by terror and deceit. They rely on fear to live and to stay in power, so they dehumanize us and give us nothing to lose, and therein lies the problem. If you give us nothing to lose, we will eventually fight back, and for just that reason. The human spirit is a very powerful thing, and if you give it the chance, it will overcome any challenge."

"We're not giving it a chance," the officer said decisively.

"Oh, but it's already too late," I said as if the Combine President himself was aware of this, "We're spreading too far and too fast. The Combine's day of reckoning has come." I wasn't going to get anything out of this guy, so I leveled my Five-seveN at his face and pulled the trigger.

I looked around for an exit and saw a ladder. I would have taken the pipes, but crawling through there again would take too long and the Canals would be swarming with Civil Protection squads by then. When I climbed the ladder, a pleasant sight greeted me.

A Combine machine gun I thought to myself, _and it's unoccupied!_ I couldn't believe my luck, because Alyx came on the radio ten seconds later.

"Gordon, I'm seeing more than twenty CPs inbound," she said, "ETA

thirty seconds,"

"Alyx?" I asked her, "You still got me on the big screen?"

"Yeah," she replied, "Why?"

"Do you have two-way audio for the plasma monitor?" I wondered, "If you do, put me on,"

I heard some rustling in the background, then a painfully loud squeak of static, and then Alyx came back on, "Okay, Gordon, you're in," she said.

I raised my voice to address the God-knows-how-many rebels watching me, eyes glued to the screen, "This is Gordon Freeman-" I began, but I was cut off by an overwhelming round of applause from the crowd of fighters. I waited for the applause to die down, and then I continued, "Apparently Civil Protection has a little problem with me trying to escape from Shitty 17," this got some laughs, and I took on a much more serious tone, "And they've got me surroundedâ€¦ those poor bastards. I don't care what comes around the corner; it's going to eat high-speed armor-piercing Combine-manufactured projectiles."

A lone CP looked down from the street, probably thinking, _who the hell is he talking to,_ and I swung the turret towards him, "Oh, lovely. I was afraid I would have had to ask for volunteers." I squeezed the triggers, and the rounds ripped into him, shredding his body armor and killing him in an instant. I saw a citizen pick up the fallen officer's Stunstick and run at two more CPs. The riot would be put down in a few minutes at most, but in the meantime it would divert some of the officers from my path. All of this was going through my head as I mowed through CP after CP, until finally the chamber clicked empty. There was no point in staying, so I ran. I ran along a twelve-inch-wide ledge, going above the mob of CPs. I took a few more rounds, and my shields dropped to 85. The pipe soon fed into the wall, forcing me to jump back down to street level. I took a quick look around when I landed, finding myself under a bridge and amid several large piles of rubble, each one several feet taller than me.

Knowing that Civil Protection was right behind me, I kept running, hazarding a glance behind me every so often. I didn't hear any boots thundering along behind me, there was no shouting or gunfire, and Alyx didn't come on the radio to warn me about any incoming threats. Of course there was the odd CP or two here and there, but Alyx knew I could handle such a minute threat and didn't bother reporting them. In fact, the only thing that told me I was still in contact with the Resistance was the cheering of the fighters every time I killed a CP officer.

To say the least, this was too easy. I was getting jumpy, constantly expecting an overwhelming ambush. Even my paranoia wasn't enough to alert me to the four CPIF officers roping in through the grate above me. CPIF, or Civil Protection Interdiction Force, is Civil Protection's answer to SWAT and other special task police forces. In order to differentiate them from the rest of the CPs, its officers wear navy blue uniforms. Instead of wearing grey armbands like regular CPs, they wore orange armbands with "CPIF" imprinted on them in white. Their gas masks have a thick orange stripe running from the

left jawbone, up to the bridge of the nose, and then back down to the right jawbone. CPIF units are seasoned officers within the Civil Protection system, and are handpicked by the City Commissioner to join its elite ranks. Their officers are rewarded with military-grade weapons and higher-grade Kevlar body armor. They are much more coordinated, accurate, and deadly than standard Civil Protection officers. When the CPIF was created, Overwatch gave them a choice of weapon between the MP5 and the MP7. The City Commissioners agreed on the MP7; arguing that although it packed less of a punch, the gun carried a 45-round magazine, as opposed to the 30-round magazine of the MP5. Its higher rate of fire and lower recoil allow the user to pour fire downrange alarmingly quickly, resulting in high efficiency against groups of hostiles. It would be perfect for the situation I was stuck in.

I cut down the first guy before he could react, but the other three immediately opened fire, forcing me behind cover. There was nothing I could do against that kind of firepower without risking significant damage to my shields, and these guys wouldn't be stupid enough to take me on in hand-to-hand combat. I had no other option but to take them head-on, or their backup units would arrive and kill me while I was sitting behind this rock. I didn't give myself time to think about it. I laid down half a magazine to keep their heads down, taking one of them down in the process. The remaining two gave me all they had when I rushed them. I managed to gun one of them down, but the other one was too close for comfort. I grabbed him in a headlock, put my Five-seveN to the side of his head, and pulled the trigger.

I took an officer's MP7 and policed their ammo. These guys always deployed ready for a prolonged firefight, so I had over 250 rounds of ammo when I was done. It turns out I finished searching the corpses just in time, because the mob of fifty CPs caught up to me the instant I finished. I didn't waste any time expending a magazine into the mass of Metrocops to whittle down the horde, dropping seven or eight of them. Seeing nearly a fifth of their forces destroyed in a matter of seconds, the remaining forces retreated.

Alyx came back on the radio when I ran back out into the canals. "Gordon, you're almost there. I've had our station at the end of the Canals prepare a hovercraft for you; the rest of the route to Black Mesa East is over water."

"Finally," I said, relieved, "I can get these CPs off my back."

"I wouldn't count on it, Gordon," she replied, "Civil Protection mans nearly the entire route. We would have had a better plan, but we had no idea you were coming."

"Actually, now that I think about it, that's a good thing," I answered.

Alyx raised an eyebrow, "Uhâ€¦ was that a joke?" she asked, confused.

"No," I said, "It gives me a chance to beat up more CPs." This got some laughs out of the fighters, but Alyx quickly silenced them, suddenly looking worried.

"Gordon, we've gotâ€¦" she began.

"Oh, shit!" I yelled, taking off at full speed for the Resistance outpost. When I turned a corner and arrived at the remote hideout, I saw that everyone was dead. Luckily, Civil Protection hadn't taken the Airboat. I jumped in and started the engine, remembering to report the outpost's demise. As soon as the motors were fully powered, I gunned the throttle, rocketing away from City 17 and its Civil Protection agents. My troubles weren't over yet, though: the mechanical sounds of spinning rotor blades and a chain gun spewing rounds into the water all around the Airboat told me that no matter how fast I went, the Combine Hunter-Chopper would always be close behind.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Chapter three done and dusted; I hope you guys liked it! Chapter four is going to be considerably longer, so it might take a while for me to write it up. As always; review, favorite, follow, yadda yadda yadda. I would also like some reader opinions on what I should do for later chapters ("Highway 17" and onwards). Suggestions are welcome and very much appreciated, PM me if you're interested!

Cheers,

SergeantLawson

4. Water Hazard

Chapter 4: Water Hazard

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Okay, I know some of you won't care too much for this chapter. I've kept the basic concept the same (Gordon getting to Black Mesa East over water and the Hunter-Chopper chasing him), but other than that I've almost completely rewritten the entire thing. Here's hoping you guys won't hate me for it, or worse; stop reading entirely.

I had never really had time to think of a plan, not with the Hunter-Chopper shooting at me. On top of that, I had to keep an eye out for Civil Protection blockades. Not that I really needed a plan anyway; I knew where I was going. If I got lost, there was always a semi-transparent golden arrow pointing towards Black Mesa East. There were a few times early on when I could have used a GPS or some input from Alyx, but there jamming signal coming from the Combine helicopter generated too much interference for any from of satellite communications to get through.

After two or three minutes of this game of cat-and-mouse, I noticed a red LED light on the hovercraft's dashboardâ€¦ right on the fuel gauge. Damn. The hovercraft had a full tank when I had left the Resistance outpost. I hazarded a glance behind me at the fuel tanks, and spotted a pair of holes with diesel fuel squirting out of them. Apparently that Hunter-Chopper was going to make my life miserable in more ways than one.

With the fuel tank leaks in play, it wasn't long before the Airboat's engine started coughing and spluttering. I figured I could get another quarter of a mile out of the tank's remnants before it ran completely bone-dry. Luckily there was a dock ahead, but Civil Protection controlled it. Great. The helicopter's pilot must have already radioed ahead to the outpost, because I was met with a wall

of gunfire when I coasted up to the dock. At the same time, a klaxon started blaring and massive gates lowered on either side of me, blocking any forward progress. I ducked behind the dashboard, using the meager protection that it offered me from their bullets. I couldn't keep moving with the holes in my fuel tank, so I had to dock, which meant exposing my suit to yet more shield damage. I didn't really have much of a choice in the first place, so I gunned straight for the dock as I emptied my Five-seveN to keep their heads down. They were shooting at me from behind a chain-link fence higher up on the compound, which meant they were unable to get a good firing arc on me once I parked underneath them. To add to my advantage, the compound's high ground hung over by about twenty feet, which ensured the safety of my Airboat. Once I had parked my Airboat, I cut the engines and took the ignition chip with me.

I kept to the side of the dock, shuffling my way to a door marked "Authorized Personnel Only." I pulled out my MP7, loaded a fresh magazine, and opened the door. I was met with a pair of CPIF officers guarding a Combine lieutenant. I aimed for the head, and the two CPIF guys went down instantly. I saw the lieutenant reaching for his .357, so I fired a couple of rounds past his head.

"I wouldn't do that again if I were you," I said as I pinned him to the desk with my forearm and confiscated his .357 revolver. I then let him back up and immediately started questioning him, "Identify yourself,"

"You first," he snarled.

"Gordon Freeman, Earth Resistance," I saw the color drain from his face, "Designation Two-Two-Niner-Delta."

"First Lieutenant Vickers, Combine Overwatch, Sector 17, Zone Bravo-3," he suddenly seemed much more cooperative. However, there was one thing the Combine had a nasty habit of doing to screw with enemy interrogators.

"Have you been through memory replacement?" I asked.

"I have," the lieutenant replied with a hint of pride.

Dammit, I wanted to punch something, _now I can't rely on anything this guy says. Whatever he tells me is just going to be a load of crap._ I debated on whether to shoot him, but ultimately decided against it. Hostages are valuable, and so are human shields. I got him in a headlock and pressed by Five-seveN to his temple.

"If you try anything, I will shoot you," I hissed into his ear. I opened the door and showed the squad of CPs my hostage. Strangely, they all let me past, but they still kept me in their sights. Any other man would have thought everything was going his way, but I knew better. They were allowing me to proceed, but they would just shoot me in the back once I had gone past. My suspicions were confirmed when a sniper round struck the concrete to my left. I pulled the trigger, dropped the dead lieutenant, and ducked behind cover. I had no weapons with sufficient range to kill the sniper, so I would have to dart from cover point to cover point. Fortunately, I had two things going for me. First and foremost, Combine sniper rifles were equipped with a fluorescent blue laser sight, which would conveniently let me know exactly where the sniper was aiming. Second,

shipping crates were scattered across the dock; this was probably a Combine supply depot. The crates would provide me with more than adequate cover. All in all, the two hundred yard dash ahead of me would be easier than I thought.

A .50 caliber round punched through the jersey barrier I was currently using as cover and struck my suit. I felt the impact even through my shields, and I didn't like the diagnostics readout.

/WARNING/

SHIELDS: 53%

HYDRAULICS SYSTEM FAILURE

/end_report/

Shit. The hydraulics system was what gave me the valuable speed boosts. Fortunately it wouldn't present much of an issue while I was in the Airboat, but I felt a shiver run down my spine when I thought of all the ways it could go wrong on the ground. Grenades, rockets, oncoming vehicles, and even falling debris could all kill me instantly without my high-speed evasive maneuvers. I looked around for anything I could use, and I remembered the late Lieutenant Vickers. I checked his pockets and found nothing, but I was overjoyed when I searched his pack. There was a small pouch full of .357 magnum rounds, a confiscated HEV charge battery, and an M83 grenade. HEV charge batteries were small and rectangular in shape, colored black, and had small LED lights embedded throughout their surface. The batteries were meant for emergency field use only, as they only restored a limited amount of power to the suit. Each battery could restore thirteen to eighteen percent of the suit's shields; and if the shields were fully charged, the power would be used to restore power to other functions.

I checked to be sure the CPs were still grouped relatively close together, crossed my fingers, and pulled the pin on the M83. The resulting explosion killed most of the CPs, and the remaining shrapnel cut through pipes and wires. The wires jumped around, smoking and sizzling, while the breached pipes belched steam in every direction. The resulting cloud of smoke and steam blinded the surviving officers. The occasional flashes of blue and orange told me when a CP had been electrified.

I suddenly realized the Combine sniper must have been trying to figure out what the hell just happened, so I took my chance and broke into a full sprint for the door on the other side of the dock. The sniper only realized I was gone when the Hunter-Chopper started shooting at me, and by then I was already halfway there. He cracked three rounds off in quick succession, trying to score another hit before I disappeared. The first two landed behind me, and the third blew a handful of concrete into the air. A fourth armor-piercing round ripped through the door I had just flung open, three inches from my face. I looked around the room and spotted a supply crate. I found a crowbar and used it to pry open the crate. Inside were a bundle of Five-sevenN ammunition and a Combine radio transmitter. Combine radio transmitters hooked around the wearer's ear like a Bluetooth device, save for a small microphone extending from the earpiece. I set the transmitter's frequency to City 17

Metropolitan/River patrol so I could have a leg up on any Combine troop movements.

I checked my weapons before I proceeded, noticing I was down to three magazines for my MP7. As I was about to go on I remembered the crowbar. The crowbar had become closely associated with me during and after the Black Mesa Incident, on the account that I had defended myself from waves of Combine bio-forms using only a crowbar until a security team showed up to get me out of there. These "bio-forms" were my former Black Mesa co-workers who had fallen victim to the Combine's first biological weaponry assault, infected by odd parasitic life forms called "headcrabs." After a short period theyâ€ changed. Their bodies literally turned inside out as they were mutated into disturbing new forms. I didn't like to think about it too much; I hope they don't remember who they were. Either way, I knew that seeing me paired with the crowbar would put a smile on any Resistance fighter's face.

I heard Combine radio chatter nearby, "Commissioner, this is CPIF unit 6. Target last engaged at supply dock Three-Seven-Delta. Sweeping area, over." I slammed a fresh clip into my MP7 just as the squad came around the corner. I fired in short bursts due to my lack of ammunition, moving from side to side as I unloaded on them. The firefight lasted less than a minute, and I had only used one magazine to kill all four guys. I heard more CPs on the other side of the door behind me, trying to cut through it with blowtorches. I didn't have time to gather ammunition from the dead cops, so I ran deeper into the building. I heard a muffled _thump_ and the door crashing to the floor behind me.

I realized I would have to take on whatever was following me sooner or later if I wanted to get out of here, and I decided sooner was better than later. I dropped to one knee around a corner and took a deep breath. I came around the corner prepared for anythingâ€ or so I thought. I was definitely _not_ prepared for the CPIF team with an assault shield twenty feet from me. I made no attempt to shoot through or around the heavy shield; it would require a grenade or similar explosion to even make a dent, and putting a round through the visor slit would require a much more skilled marksman than me. I cut and run, heading wherever the winding hallways took me. After a couple of minutes of fleeing I spotted a ladder, which was rather convenient given the radio chatter I was picking up through my illicit headset.

"CPIF Riot Team 6, this is CPIF Riot Team 2. We are currently en route to your position to assist target apprehension. Rendezvous near control room and execute pincer interception tactics accordingly."

"Understood, Team 2. Team 6 copies all."

"10-4, Team 6. Team 2 out."

"Team 6 out."

Control room, I thought, _you don't say?_ If I could get there before the CPIF squads cut me off, I could raise the gates blocking my Airboat's exit. I would still have to deal with the fuel leaks, but one problem at a time. I broke into a full sprint, cursing my suit's hydraulics malfunction as I ran for the control room. I

reached my goal as the oncoming CPIF unit caught sight of their buddies. I slammed the door shut, but it wouldn't keep them out. I spied a fire containment button covered in glass. I smashed the glass with my elbow and hit the button. A thick blast shield lowered in front of the door. Now they would have to force their way in, which would take around ten minutes.

I fiddled with the controls in order to figure out which buttons did what. I was careful to stay away from any giant red buttons imprinted with ****DO NOT PRESS****. After a good minute I struck gold, sliding a lever upwards to raise the gates. I checked over my shoulder to be sure nothing was going on behind me. The riot teams had ceased trying to force their way into the control room. I switched on the security camera monitors to be certain. Sure enough, they were just standing out there in the hallway, waiting for me. Something was very wrong, though; the Combine never gave up unless they were ordered to do so. The fact that they had indeed given up meant something bad was about to happen.

Suddenly the room's windows shattered. I turned back around and was met with a trio of CPIF operatives armed with Shocksticks, the CPIF variant of the Stunstick. The Shockstick was a nasty piece of work, delivering 25,000 volts instead of the standard 10,000. The extra fifteen thousand volts were added for one reason: to incapacitate or kill enemies at point-blank range.

These guys were hand-to-hand specialists; their skills denoted by the gray fist on each officer's right sleeve. The officers on the left and right sides held Shocksticks in each hand, making them doubly deadly. The guy in the center held a double-ended Shockstick. It was three feet long, and although only the ends were electrically charged, the shaft could still put somebody in a world of hurt. Barney had come up with a joke about the double-ended Shockstick, "Hey guys; it's Darth Maul!" Resistance fighters across the nation had since adopted the joke.

The officer shifted the weapon into his right hand and began to pull off his mask. I had already figured out who it was by the quadruple golden stripes and the white eagle emblazoned with
C17.

"Commissioner Thorn," I growled, "It's been a while."

"Freeman, you certainly have an odd sense of humor," the Commissioner shook his head in mock wonder.

"Shut up," I snarled, "Everything you say disgusts me,"

"Is that so? I am rather open to my opponents' opinions." He was trying to piss me off so I would slip up. It was a good play, but I wouldn't let him win.

"Are you going to stand there and talk all day, or can we move on to the part where I beat the hell out of all three of you bare-handed?" I aimed right for his pride and hit a bull's eye. Something changed in his face and he paused for a couple of seconds. Then he shouted in rage and charged at me, holding his double-ended Shockstick like a spearman. His implants had stimulated anger and rage to make him start fighting me more quickly. The adverse side effect of anger was poor judgment, and I would exploit that weakness.

I sidestepped the Commissioner's blind charge and stuck my right leg out to the side. He tripped over my extended leg, and his momentum carried him facedown to the floor. I didn't have time to step on the Commissioner's neck while he was down because of the two other CPIF officers in the room, so I engaged them while the Commissioner picked himself up. One of the officers swung overhand at me with his Shockstick. I grabbed his wrist and squeezed as hard as I could. My HEV suit's hydraulics may have been out of commission, but the suit itself was made out of a blend of extremely tough materials, which meant I could still do some damage. I felt something give in the cop's wrist, so I let him go. I may hate the Combine, but I still try to give them the option to retreat. This guy chose not to, lashing out again with an inside sweep. I took hold of his arm at the elbow and bicep and shoved him away. His own momentum turned against him and sent him into a spin. He came out of it disoriented and dizzy. I kicked him in the shins, punched him in the stomach, kneed him in the groin, and elbowed him in the jaw. The combined impact of my blows knocked him into the air. He sailed headfirst into the wall and collapsed. I could tell he was still conscious, but he was definitely out of the fight.

The other CPIF agent jabbed me in the back with his Shockstick, dropping my shields to 31. I whirled around in a spinning hook kick, slamming my heel into the side of his head. He dropped to one knee and reached a hand up to touch his ringing ear. I kicked him in the face while he was down. He flipped over onto his back and stopped moving. I looked around for my third foe. Where the hell was Commissioner Thorn?

The Commissioner grabbed me in a headlock and began to tighten his arm against his chest. My airflow was abruptly cut off, and I felt my windpipes slowly being crushed. I saw edges of darkness creeping into the corners of my vision; I had to do something fast. I stomped on the Commissioner's right foot, making him slightly loosen his hold on me. I wrestled with him for a few seconds, but he wouldn't give up. I dropped to one knee and threw him over my shoulder. I planted a boot on his chest before he could stand, but he still refused to give in. I pulled my .357 off of its magnetic slot on my suit and cocked the hammer.

"Any last words, Commissioner?" I said with absolutely no emotion at all.

He spat in my face. Just when I was about to pull the trigger, the blast door exploded and the pair of riot teams began to pour into the room. Everyone turned to look at us. Silence filled the room for a short few seconds.

"Orders, sir?" one of the officers asked.

"Kill him."

I jumped out the shattered window as gunfire erupted all around me. The twenty-foot drop left me unscathed thanks to my HEV suit. I had to find a way out of here, and fast. I saw the Commissioner appear in the window, and he was holding a detonator. I heard a distant explosion and saw a plume of black smoke when he pressed the button. I had a hunch that he had just blown up my Airboat, so I didn't bother going that way. I ran for the river, hoping to find something

other than razor ribbon or an electric fence.

To my surprise, I found a Combine coast patrol unit. They were completely unaware of my presence, leaning on the sides of their boat and chatting away. I shot two of the three Combine sailors and held the third one at gunpoint. I said one word:

"Drive!"

The other Combine patrol boats we passed by didn't bother us; their crews thought we were on their side. I didn't need to hold the Combine sailor at gunpoint either because we both knew he couldn't take me alone and that his chances of survival would increase dramatically if he didn't try anything stupid. The driver was shaking in fear; both from my presence and what his superiors would do to him if they found out he was helping me. He had obviously not been through memory replacement; he did not portray the calm, collected, ruthless air of indoctrinated Combine personnel. Upon getting a closer look at him, I realized he was very young.

I returned my Five-seveN to its magnetic slot on my HEV suit. "Relax, I'm not going to shoot you unless you try to attack me." This seemed to calm him down a bit; he let out the breath he had been holding and wasn't shivering as much. "How old are you, kid?"

"N-Nineteen, sir," he replied shakily.

I tried to get his perspective on the war, "Why did you join the Combine?"

"Iâ€¦ it was more for the better living conditions than anything else. I get three MREs a day and Civil Protection doesn't search the barracks for contraband every week."

I tried to chip away at his resolve and already uncertain allegiance to the Combine. "Do you realize what the Combine has done; what they're still doing?"

"I know what they've done," he said, "Everyone does. They're in charge now and there's nothing we can do about it."

"Not for long." I said it like it was a cold, hard fact. With any luck, it would be. "The Resistance will stand tall, we will stand together, and we will prevail. The Uprising is coming."

His next words surprised me, "I hope you're right."

Something caught my eye outside, and I looked out the window. Another patrol boat was getting a bit too curious for comfort. I felt my heart rate quicken, the last thing I needed was a high-speed gun battle with Combine patrol boats in hot pursuit.

"Uh, sir," the driver was choked with fear again, "We're being hailed."

I put a hand on his shoulder, "Easy, kid. Act like everything's normal and we'll be fine." The pilot nodded several times, took a couple of deep breaths, and keyed the boat's comlink.

The voice that came through was low and synthesized from the radio's

built-in Vocoder, "River Unit Three-Seven-One, this is River Unit Three-Zero-Four."

My hijacked boat's pilot calmly replied, "Three-Seven-One, receiving. Go ahead, Three-Zero-Four."

"Three-Seven-One, report ops and status."

The pilot released the comlink button, "We might have trouble, get ready," he muttered to me.

The other boat's radioman came through again, "Three-Seven-One, ops and status."

"Three-Zero-Four, ops normal. Status green across the board."

The rival boat's crew was not satisfied, "Three-Seven-One, order your crew to report via comlink. Scans of your craft show two biotics and one ID chip." A 'biotic' was the Combine military term for an organic life form.

Thank God for Vocoders, I thought as the pilot recited his late crewmates' names, ranks, and service numbers. The Vocoder built into the radio scrambled the pilot's voice, so the crew on the other end had no idea they were being conned. When they still weren't satisfied, the pilot began sweating uncontrollably.

"Three-Seven-One, bio-signal checks on your gunner and radioman show K.I.A. Have your crew exit the pilothouse and remain on the deck."

"Three-Seven-One copies all. Standby, Three-Zero-Four." The pilot deactivated the comlink and turned to me. "Sir, they've called our bluff. Reinforcements are probably en route as we speak." I unholstered my .357 and the poor kid turned pale. He backed up into a corner and tears welled in his eyes, "Please don't shoot me sir! I tried my best, please don't kill me!"

I gave my voice a firm edge, "Calm down, kid. I said I wasn't going to shoot you, remember?" He nodded fervently. I stalked over to the rear of the pilothouse and swung the door open. I spoke over my shoulder, "When you hear a gunshot, ram them." I stepped outside. I held the door roughly at a ninety-degree angle to keep myself hidden from the rival crew's prying eyes. Crouching below the windows, I moved along the opposite side of the deck and stopped just around the corner. I shifted around for a stable firing position at the boat's gunner. His flak jacket made me think twice about a center-mass shot. I leveled my .357 at the enemy gunner's head and cocked the hammer. I pulled the trigger. The round punched through his helmet, landed in his temple, and sent him flying overboard into the water. I braced myself on the handrails as our boat lurched towards theirs. The nose of a Combine patrol boat was much stronger than its flanks, so the results of the impact were quite one-sided. The boat's angular nose slammed into its counterpart's flank, the impact jarring everyone on board the pair of boats. The enemy craft's flank crumpled inwards. The heavily damaged patrol boat began to belch smoke and tilt sideways. The pilothouse door flew open and the two enemy sailors dove into the water as their vessel capsized. They frantically swam for the shore.

I knew every patrol boat on the river was probably headed our way, so I returned to the pilothouse. I handed a slip of paper to the pilot, "Head to these coordinates. Do not enter them into the system; just get there as fast as you can. I'm taking the gun." He nodded. Closing the door behind me, I exited the pilothouse. I climbed the short four-rung ladder on the side of the pilothouse and took hold of the boat's mounted gun.

Combine patrol boats were armed with a twin-barrel machine gun. While its rate of fire was lower than most other mounted guns, it was more than made up for in sheer stopping power. Firing armor-piercing depleted uranium cartridges at six hundred fifty rounds per minute, it was a force to be reckoned with. The guns had a semi-transparent holographic display projected above them, which displayed countless readings and statuses. I glanced around at the display for a few seconds and inferred that the HUD was standard Combine vehicle equipment. All of its readouts were displayed in a slightly pale blue, but a warning icon would appear in red if the weapon malfunctioned or somebody managed to get a missile lock on the boat. The weapon's ammunition counter was at the display's upper-right hand corner. A targeting reticle was in the center of the HUD. Any weapon malfunctions would appear in the lower right corner. A motion tracker was displayed in the lower left corner.

Motion trackers were standard-issue equipment for all Combine vehicles. The tracker's range was limited to a mere fifty meters on patrol boats such as the one I was aboard now, but they reached out over a hundred miles on Combine battle cruisers. While motion trackers lack the range of radar systems, they were immeasurably more reliable. Resistance spies in the Combine ranks had begun leaking troubling information: Overwatch had recently begun field-testing motion trackers housed inside their soldiers' helmets. The prototypes carried a small radius of about ten meters, but the advantage they gave to Combine ground forces was unquestionable.

On motion tracker readouts, friendly forces were displayed as yellow dots, while others were displayed in red. The trackers discerned friend from foe by scanning for Combine ID chips, which were implanted into every soldier's neck and housed in every vehicle's body. Ironically, this meant I would be blasting anything yellow.

The pilot's voice came through the radio, "Behind us, sir!" A pair of yellow blips appeared on the tracker. I swung the gun around and sized up my opponents. They were standard Combine Mk II patrol boats like the one I was on, fitted with medium armor and built for patrol ops. The twin-barreled machine guns spewed lead all around the boat, landing a few hits here and there but not doing much damage. I squeezed the triggers and returned fire. The low, drumming rhythm of the mounted gun reverberated in my ears. The boat on my right was closer so I targeted it first. I kept my hand as steady as I could, aiming for the pilothouse. The windows shattered inwards and the two crewmen inside collapsed. The patrol boat began listing lazily to the left and smashed into the rocks. The other patrol boat had slid up alongside us in the meantime and had begun hammering us with heavy gunfire. The radioman was even out on the deck, popping rounds off with his Five-seveN. I knew the craft's engine was housed aft of the pilothouse. My rounds cut the radioman down and penetrated into the boat. I heard an explosion after a few seconds of sustained fire.

Plumes of smoke belched from its innards and flaming steel flew skywards. The patrol craft skipped on a wave and catapulted into the air. The vessel flipped end over end. It landed on its nose, skimmed over onto its side, and exploded in a bright orange flash.

I had a moment to breathe easy during the lull in combat. Unfortunately it didn't last; the pilot alerted me less than a minute later, "We've got more up front!" The pilot ducked as a burst of machine gun fire went through the windows. I rotated the gun to face forwards again, coming face to face with a quartet of Mk II patrol boats. I noticed a pair of CPIF operatives on the aft deck of each boat. Commissioner Thorn had probably sent them along to provide an increased volume of fire and to serve as boarding parties should the opportunity present itself. They opened up with their MP7s as the gunners poured fire into the boat.

"I'm taking heavy fire; get 'em off me!" The pilot was becoming increasingly worried about hull integrity. I targeted the leftmost boat and moved to the right, raking fire into the CPIF officers. They all either fell backwards onto the deck or tumbled over the sides. The boats' gunners were still a major issue but I couldn't get a bead on them through the thick armor plating on the guns. I had to try something risky.

The aft decks on Mk II patrol boats like this one were roofed with a heavy steel canvas, which stood slightly taller than the pilothouse. I stood out of the gunner seat and stepped over the side of the pilothouse, balancing myself on the first and second ladder rungs. I reached out and gripped the edge of the canvas with my fingertips. I swung my legs up onto the canvas and pushed myself up onto my feet. Widening my stance to steady myself, I drew my Five-seveN. The handgun would be fairly inaccurate with the boat rocking back and forth, so I took a fairly non-conservative approach. I put four rounds in the direction of each gunner to ensure they were taken out, and then dropped the clip with the remaining two cartridges.

I barely had time to move and take the machine gun before the pilot yelled, "Oh, shit! We've got Mk III's coming up fast!"

Two words were in mind when Overwatch commissioned the Mk III patrol boat: speed enforcement. Mk III patrol boats were not sent out on patrols; they remained on standby as a rapid response reinforcement unit. Their light armor made them somewhat vulnerable, but their top speed of 70mph more than made up for it. Only two crewmen were needed to operate the Mk III: a driver and a gunner. The driver was tasked with the duties normally assigned to the radioman on larger patrol boats. On account of their incredible speed, a lighter weapon was needed. After extensive field-testing, ONAVCOM (Overwatch Naval Command) settled on a mounted M249 SAW light machine gun with a 150-round munitions belt.

The pilot called out targets, "Contact right! Three of them!"

I rotated the gun and traded fire with the trio of pursuing patrol craft, unleashing a vastly superior wall of lead upon them. My guns tore through the boats one by one, but not without receiving some damage in return. The armor plating around the front of the mounted guns was dented, the pilothouse windows were all but gone, and the boat's paint job was generally ruined.

"Another one out front!" The pilot was shouting over the heavy gunfire. The other boat's pilot was smarter than the others, weaving unpredictably from side to side and frequently switching the pattern. His gunner was a notably skilled marksman, keeping a steady stream of fire pointed towards my boat. We traded fire for about twenty seconds before I heard the pilot scream.

"Dammit! I'm hit!" he yelled.

I keyed the seat's radio, "Keep pressure on it! Where are you hit?"

The pilot cried out in pain again. "My arm!"

"I'm coming! Just let me deal with this guy!"

Fueled with a new anger towards the Combine, I zeroed in on the Mk III with the precision of a laser, shredding .50 caliber rounds into its crewmen and across the boat. I didn't waste time with the ladder, deciding instead to swing down through the shattered pilothouse window. The pilot was still crying out.

"Do you have a medkit on board?" I asked.

"It'sâ€¦ to my leftâ€¦ on the bulkhead!" The initial flares of pain had numbed off, reducing his shrieks to sustained groans. I pulled the medical kit off the wall and flicked the latches open.

"Give me your arm," I said calmly. I took the knife from the first-aid kit and cut off the pilot's left sleeve for easier access. "This will numb the pain," I told him as I injected a shot of morphine into his wound. The pilot's pupils dilated slightly and he relaxed.

"Thanks, doc," he said, "Feels a little better."

"The morphine isn't going to do much good if you bleed out in a few minutes," I said as I rummaged through the kit's contents, "You need a field dressing." I wound the bandage tightly around his arm.

I stood and began moving to retake the boat's gun. The pilot called out to me as I was exiting the pilothouse, "Dr. Freeman?"

"Yes?" I turned and raised an eyebrow.

"Why are you doing this?"

I was puzzled, "Fighting the Combine?"

"No, I mean why are you helping me?"

I paused for a moment. "You've got a good heart, kid. I'm making sure it's in the right place."

The pilot frowned, "I don't understandâ€¦"

"Now might be the time to reconsider your career options." I climbed the ladder and once more took hold of the boat's gun.

The Combine radio chatter had become frantic in my absence. It

sounded like Commissioner Thorn had every available patrol boat looking for me. He probably did. As the minutes ticked by and Black Mesa East drew closer, I knew something was off. If there were so many patrol boats after us, then why weren't we seeing any? The answer came in the sound of rotor blades. I saw the source of the noise around the next corner.

"Hunter-Chopper!" the pilot yelled. The boat lurched forwards as we passed underneath the helicopter. The Hunter-Chopper opened fire at the same time as I did. We traded fire as our craft danced around each other in the widening river. The Hunter-Chopper was far superior to the Mk II patrol boat in every way. It had two independently manned guns while I only had one. Its armor was thicker and made of a composition still unknown to Resistance scientists. The Hunter-Chopper was faster and more durable than the Mk II, and its agility was unmatched. It was a losing fight. I would probably be dead in less than five minutes unless I could call in some Resistance fire support, but the Hunter-Chopper's jammer was blocking any kind of communications. The jammer would have to be destroyed if I was to have any chance of survival, but it was housed in the middle of the chopper. Blasting through the armor plating would take too long. What else could I do? After a few moments, it hit me.

I swung down through the pilothouse window, startling the pilot.

"Where's the radio?" I shouted over the whirring miniguns.

"To my left!" The pilot yelled back.

I tuned the boat's radio to a Resistance emergency channel. This particular channel had been disguised and encoded as a Combine military frequency, negating any form of enemy signal jammers. I cut right to the chase, "This is Gordon Freeman! I've hijacked a Combine patrol boat and I'm pinned down by a Hunter-Chopper!"

The operator came back through the speakers, "Freeman, what is your designation code?" Everyone who joined the Resistance was given a designation code. This code was essentially a rebel's serial number, used primarily for identification and security purposes.

I spoke slowly and clearly, "Freeman, Earth Resistance, designation Two-Two-Niner-Delta."

"Designation confirmed. Good to have you back, doc."

I cut back to my current problem, "I've hijacked a Combine patrol boat and I'm pinned down by a Hunter-Chopper. My position is on the river, half a klick north of Black Mesa East."

"Understood, Freeman. We're sending a heavy team along the shore now, ETA two minutes."

"Much appreciated, Black Mesa East. Freeman out." I yelled down to the pilot as I reclaimed the machine gun, "Dodge around behind the rocks and don't worry about my aim! Just keep us alive; we'll bring this thing down!"

"Got it!" The pilot gunned it for the rocks while I harassed the Hunter-Chopper with the MG.

The Mk II may not have been as agile as we would have preferred, but it managed well enough going between the scattered rocks. The enemy helicopter's gunfire chipped away at the rocks but it failed to punch through any of them. We had been dancing around through the small archipelago for about a minute when the gunfire stopped.

"Where'd he go?" the pilot shouted. Three seconds later an explosion resonated through the water. "Holy shit! They're firing rockets at us! We're screwed, man! We're screwed!"

I squinted through the glaring sunlight and saw something moving on top of the ridgeline. Small plumes of flame sporadically appeared behind them, followed by trails of white smoke.

"No," I yelled, "That's the Resistance!" I felt a wave of relief and joy running through me.

Time seemed to slow as the first rocket impacted. A small chunk of armor plating flew off of the Hunter-Chopper, flaming as it tumbled down into the water. The rest of the half-dozen Resistance fighters opened up with heavy machine guns and rocket launchers. The Hunter-Chopper shuddered from the pounding when I opened up with my own machine gun. More armor plating was blown off with every new impact. One of the Resistance fighters carried a bolt-action sniper rifle. He hadn't fired a single round for the entire battle, and I knew why when he finally pulled the trigger. An armor-piercing .50 caliber round went into each gunner's chest. One of them slumped over his gun while the other was sent flying into the river. With both of its gunners neutralized, the Hunter-Chopper tried to break away and flee, but the Resistance fighters wouldn't have it. The sniper loaded an incendiary round into his bolt-action rifle and fired it into the chopper's now-exposed fuel cells. The Hunter-Chopper was sent spinning by the explosion. The pilot tried to regain control of his chopper, but it smashed nose-first into the cliff side. The crash set off yet more chain explosions, ripping the Hunter-Chopper apart from the inside. The Resistance fighters cheered wildly as the enemy aircraft lazily toppled down onto the shoreline and came to rest.

As soon as the Hunter-Chopper was destroyed, Alyx came up on my suit's vid link, "Gordon, everyone is going insane down here! What's going on?"

I turned to face the enemy wreck so whoever else was watching could see the Resistance's latest kill, "We just shot down a Hunter-Chopper!"

She put a hand to her mouth, "Oh my God!"

"The team you sent up deserves medals and hot meals all around. I would be dead right now if it wasn't for them."

"Where are you now?" she asked.

"I'm half a klick away, and I have a new recruit. We're coming home."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This concludes chapter four. I really hope nobody was too disgusted by the changes, but _please let me know if the changes made this a botched chapter!_ Your reviews and PM's, whether positive

or negative, will only help me understand what my readers want from future chapters. In other news, I've decided to break this fic down into three "acts" or "parts" because of its length. This is the end of "Act one" if you will. Act one goes up to the end of chapter four (here). Act two runs from "Black Mesa East" through "Nova Prospekt". Finally, act three will finish off my first fic; starting with "Anticitizen One" and ending at "Dark Energy". On a more somber note, I may not update this story for a week or two. As much as I hate to admit it, school has to take priority over fanfiction [grumbles unprintable obscenities]. My teachers have been hammering me with homework lately and I've been drowning in English papers. Lucky for me though, they've finally started loosening the noose again and I have room to breathe. I am devoting as much of my spare time to this fic as I can, and I will continue to come through for you guys. Uprising will not, repeat will ****NOT**** become another incomplete fic, another unfulfilled promise, or another failure. I will keep writing, I will keep uploading, and I will finish this fic if the damn thing kills me. Who knows? If this thing garners enough attention, I just might start a sequel about Episode One. Either way, I hope everyone continues to enjoy my work!

Cheers,

SergeantLawson

5. Black Mesa East

Chapter 5: Black Mesa East

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I know it's been a while since I've posted anything, butâ€¦ I'm back! :D I'm doing a few things differently with Black Mesa East. First, I'm not going to introduce Dr. Mossman until a later chapter (I don't know exactly when yet). I won't reveal the second thing here; read the chapter to find out! :)

The dock was empty of personnel when the pilot docked our Combine patrol boat. It was unsurprising that no one was outside; Combine scanners, both orbital and local, would detect them if they were. The pilot parked the vessel in the most secluded spot he could find and cut the engines. Something dawned on me as we casually strode toward the blast doors.

"I never did catch your name."

"It's Walker, Ryan Walker."

That was the first time I ever shook hands with the Combine.

The massive blast doors creaked and groaned as they opened, revealing the usual four-man security detail on the other side. Seeing a Combine uniform approaching, they instantly raised their weapons and zeroed in on Walker. I instantly stepped into their firing lines.

"Hold your fire!" I shouted.

One of them, a muscular, middle-aged man, objected, "Dr. Freeman, with all due respect; what the hell are you doing?"

I took a couple of steps forward. "He's with me. Stand down."

Nobody moved.

"Are you insane?" another rebel almost shouted, "You're bringing the enemy into our only major command center within a hundred miles of the Citadel!"

"Look at him," I partially stepped aside, "He's not trying to kill me or any of you. His own men shot him. Civil Protection is becoming more aggressive, and I have a feeling we're going to need people like him more and more: people from the inside. If that isn't enough proof, he intentionally rammed into another patrol boat and sunk it. He also just handed you the only working Combine vehicle we have. Think about it for a moment. Where does that put you?"

After what felt like an eternity, three of them lowered their guns. The fourth remained stubbornly rooted to the spot, his shotgun still trained on the pilot. One of his comrades turned to him.

"Come on, Dante," he said, "If Freeman says he's clean, he's clean."

The fighter grit his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and I was almost certain he was going to shoot Walker.

"Damn it," he muttered as he lowered his shotgun. They turned to leave just as Alyx came walking up the ramp with Eli Vance himself in tow.

"Vega, what's going on out here?" she demanded.

The beefy man grunted. "Apparently we're letting the Combine into Black Mesa East." He stormed off into the base, regretting not having pulled the trigger.

Alyx was hesitant, "Gordonâ€¦ are you sure about this?"

"Positive," I said, "Check my helmet cam if you want proof."

Eli Vance, the leader of the Resistance, addressed the pilot, "What's your name, son?"

"Ryan Walker," the kid replied nervously.

"Eli Vance." Eli extended his hand. Ryan's eyes were as wide as saucers when he realized whom he was speaking to. They shook hands, which gave me a thought. Maybe Ryan isn't the only one we can convince to join the Resistance.

Ryan struggled to think of what to say. "Sir, Iâ€¦ uhâ€¦ it's an honor."

"Please, call me Eli."

Ryan blinked several times and shook his head lightly, "Sorry. Just nervous, I guess." He paused, "There's somethingâ€¦ something you need to know."

Eli raised an eyebrow, waiting for an answer. After several quiet seconds, Ryan said what was on his mind, "All Combine personnel have an ID chip implanted in their neck. I won't feel like I belong here until it's taken out."

Eli smiled, "Well then, let's take care of that." He turned to his daughter, "Alyx, could you escort Walker down to the med bay?"

Alyx pushed herself off the wall she had been leaning on and uncrossed her arms, "Sure. Come on, Walker."

She began walking back inside, the former Combine sailor trailing at a short distance. He couldn't help staring, but quickly averted his eyes when she glanced back over her shoulder. Eli and I shared a knowing glance. We both shook our heads and snickered, clearly thinking the same thing: _Oh, to be nineteen again!_

Eli broke the following idle silence after several seconds, "We should get inside. I'm convening a war council soon; we need to get you up to speed, and vice versa. Meet me in the war room in an hour. Until then, why don't you walk around the base, shake hands here and there? It certainly wouldn't hurt morale."

Alyx and Walker finally found me eight dozen handshakes and greetings later.

"Gordon! are you alright?" she asked.

I sighed, "Too many damned handshakes! ow!" A nasty cramp had appeared in my right shoulder.

The only sympathy I received was a laugh and a light punch in the shoulder.

"Aren't you glad you joined?" I didn't answer. "Well?" she persisted.

"I'm thinking!"

I switched gears and turning to the pilot, "They pulled that chip out of your neck already, Ryan?"

"Yeah. Didn't feel a thing." He twisted his neck from side to side. I noticed he had been fitted for a Resistance uniform. The faded blue jacket, olive drab pants, Kevlar vest, tan combat boots, and Lambda armband all looked natural on him.

"Welcome to the Resistance," I said after a couple of seconds.

"Uh, Gordon!" Alyx tapped her wrist and showed me her watch. _2103! What time did-_

It suddenly hit me. "Dammit, I'm late!" I stopped when I noticed they weren't following me. "Ryan, Alyx; are you coming?"

"I don't have permission to attend Command meetings," she explained, "Only generals, colonels, Eli, and you are qualified."

"Oh." I felt bad for bringing it up. "Ryan, you're coming."

"What?" he said, his jaw hanging open.

"The brass needs solid intel, and right now you're our best bet." I once again took off for the war room, this time with Ryan Walker behind me.

We arrived at approximately 2107 (9:07pm), and the honor guards quickly ushered us inside the blast doors.

"Ah, Freeman," one of the men spoke up, "I knew you would arrive eventually." He narrowed his eyes. _Dick._

Trying to sound as respectful as I could, I replied, "My apologies, Colonel."

He shook his head, "Oh, the formalities. Tell me, Freeman, do you believe you are above the men and women in this room? I don't recall anyone else showing up late to such important meetings." _What the hell is this guy's problem?_ Before I could reply he cut me off again, "And who is this?" He gestured to Ryan.

I let a sharp edge into my voice. "His name, _Colonel_, is Ryan Walker; our new expert on Combine weapons and equipment."

"Appointed by whom?" _For God's sake, somebody shut him up!_

"Appointed by me." Eli spoke up.

"I believe you may have lost your sense of judgment, Eli."

I had had enough. "Enough, Colonel. Last time I checked, _you_ didn't have to fight your way out of the Black Mesa Incident. _You_ have never set foot inside a Combine-controlled city. _You_ have never had to fire your weapon at anything except a bull's-eye target. So let me ask you something, Colonel," I made sure that last word sounded very belittling and put a condescending smile on my face, "Do you believe _you_ are above the men and women in this room? I don't recall anyone else showing such signs of appalling disrespect to _anyone_ wearing Resistance colors, regardless of rank or standing. Until you can prove to everyone in this room, including myself, that you are capable of more than spouting empty words and flashing around your birdie on a stick, sit down and let the real brass handle things."

"Freeman has a point, _Lieutenant-Colonel_," one of the generals spoke up.

The jackass tried to retort, "Sir, perhaps I heard you wrong."

"No, _Major_, you did not," the general demoted him once again, "And it now appears you are of insufficient rank to access this room. Leave now, or be court-martialed."

The former colonel was speechless, his mouth hung open as he tried to process what just happened. He stood, balled his hands into fists, and left the room, grumbling unintelligible things the whole way out.

"Thank you, General Harris," Eli broke the ensuing silence, "Now, if this meeting would come to a proper opening. All rise." We all pivoted towards the pair of flags. One was a U.S. flag, the stars and stripes proud and bright. The other flag displayed the Resistance colors; an orange Lambda with an orange ring around it set in a black background. The war room's occupants stood at rigid attention, saluting the flags of freedom as we recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

"_I pledge allegiance,_
To the flag,
Of the United States of America,
And to the Republic,
For which it stands.
One nation, under God,
Indivisible,
With liberty and justice for all."

Eli began the proceedings, "As you all know, we would normally begin with logistics and inventory reports, and then move into the operational updates. However, that will not be the case this time, as we have the return of one very special individual on our minds. Welcome back, _Colonel_ Freeman." Nods of respect and light applause occupied the room for a few short moments.

"Eli, I think you've made a mistake," I said, not quite willing to accept the promotion.

"No, I haven't," he smiled, "After Major Reynolds earned his new rank, there is, or rather was, an open spot on the Council."

I still protested, "But I don't thinkâ€"

One of the colonels held up a finger, "One moment," he keyed his com to the base's PA system, "Attention all personnel, attention all personnel. The time is now 2130. Nonessential personnel, report to your barracks. Security watch, report to the armory for patrol assignments. That is all." He released his thumb from the mic clipped to his dress uniform.

"You've got the job, Freeman, you might as well enjoy it." I simply shrugged in reply. Eli continued, "Anyway, let's hear your report, Gordon. What are the Combine up to now?" The world grew silent as Resistance High Command awaited my answer.

I took a deep breath. "Nothing good, I'm afraid. How is contact holding up with our agents inside City 17?"

"We're showing a sixty percent loss of contact, and the number keeps climbing daily," a major general responded, presumably the Director of Communications.

I laid the news on heavy, "That's because of Civil Protection."

Everybody looked on with expectant eyes. "They've launched what they're calling 'Operation: Lambda Locator'. Essentially, they are rooting out and terminating anyone suspected of being a Resistance operative. I've seen some of the damage. I was in one of the apartments they raided. Theyâ€¦ killed everyone. Shot them like fish in a barrel." I saw muscles tighten throughout the room, "I managed to save one of the agents, though: Alyx Vance." Everyone breathed easy for a few seconds. "That's not the worst of it, though: Commissioner Thorn himself is in on the op; I've run into him twice already. Almost killed him the second time, but a couple of CPIF riot teams showed up before I couldâ€¦"

"Wait, 'riot teams'?" one of the colonels cut me off.

I nodded. "Yes. Walker, give them the details. Everything; they've got the time."

The former Combine pilot tapped a few buttons on the plasma monitor's control board, bringing up a live orbital view of Sector 17. There were murmurs of surprise and recognition.

"A live satellite feed?" Eli commented thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir," Walker confirmed, "Directly from the Combine orbital network."

"Impressive."

Walker cut right to the chase, using a laser pointer to specify certain areas. "Over the past month, Civil Protection has become more aggressive. Their tactics have changed and improved, and the CPIF has gone from being a small unit to a fully funded self-sufficient division. They can deploy anywhere in City 17 within minutes via ground and air, they are better trained than everyday CPs, and they are rapidly becoming a bridge between Civil Protection and the Overwatch military." He paused for a few seconds before playing his fingers across the control pad again. The image switched to a Combine assault shield and Ryan continued speaking. "This is a Combine assault shield. Its depleted uranium core already makes it impossible for small caliber rounds to penetrate through. The inner layers of lead and refined steel add even more protection, and the titanium shell laughs at armor-piercing rounds. Even a grenade will have little effect."

"Well, then how the hell are we supposed to punch through it?" someone interjected.

"General, the shield is made of Combine metals and depleted uranium. 'Punching through' is impossible with small arms fire. However, there is a design flaw that a sniper could exploit: the viewing slit. I personally wouldn't recommend it because it's a thirty-to-one shot at best. There are only three sure ways to foil an assault shield: calling in an orbital strike, somehow getting behind them, or firing a rocket at them. The third option is the most realistic. The rocket may not penetrate the armor, but the blast will kill them anyway." The officers nodded in agreement.

But there was one thing Walker hadn't said. He shifted nervously in place, contemplating whether to continue or not. I nodded slightly, and he finally spoke after several deep breaths. "There'sâ€¦ one more

thing." The Resistance flag officers looked up from their datapads and coffee mugs, "The Combine have increased river patrols, and right now they're swarming the waterways; more than likely searching for Freeman and I. It's only a matter of time before one of their boats moseys along by us; I strongly suggest we pull all exterior personnel inside until they give us some breathing room."

"Very well," Eli agreed, "Gentlemen, if you have nothing moreâ€|?" the room's occupants shook their heads. We stood at attention, recited the Pledge of Allegiance once more, and filed out of the room in order of rank.

The Resistance fighter patrolled the halls, bored out of his mind. Why hadn't he shot that Combine soldier? They were all the same; the bastard would turn on them sooner or later. Damn it, why hadn't he pulled theâ€ He thought he saw a blur of white and red flit across his vision. _What the hell was that?_

"Yo, Pressley! This isn't funny, man!" he called out.

No answer.

"Pressley?"

Still nothing.

"Pressleyâ€|?" The watchman drew his flashlight and Desert Eagle, sensing something was off. He moved cautiously forward, his hand shaking slightly as he held his pistol out in front of him. There it was again! Was he seeing things? No, he had _definitely_ seen something.

The pipes creaked above his head, making him whip around towards the source. When he saw the cause of the noise, he froze. A slim, female figure was hanging off of the pipes. She was clad in a white suit of armor, but it didn't hinder her movements at all. The bullet-blocking nano-fiber combat skin bent and stretched with her, leaving flexibility unhindered. She held a suppressed Glock-18 automatic pistol with a 36-round extended magazine in one hand and a 5-inch combat knife in the other. She wore no helmet; her combat UI visor offered the same statuses with less bulk. The semi-transparent visor hid her eyes behind a red glare. The Combine insignia imprinted on her right breastplate was slightly rotated; the claw facing upward instead of slanting left. The triple bronze bars above the insignia denoted her as a lieutenant-commander, but what caught the Resistance fighter's attention was the three-letter acronym below the insignia: ****S.T.G.****

Oh shit! The guard tried to run, but the assassin tackled him before he could even move. His gun disappeared with a swift ax kick to his wrist and he was on the floor in less than two seconds. The guy didn't even have a chance to scream before her knife's cold steel slit his throat.

She tapped her earpiece twice, and three more identically equipped women dropped down from the pipes and vents at the all-clear signal. The Special Tasks Group detachment formed up around their CO as she bent down and deftly took possession of his security access card. They darted down hall after hall until they reached the security room. There were four Resistance guards inside: one was looking at a

wall of monitors, her legs crossed as she sipped her coffee, another was cleaning weapons, and the other two were playing backgammon on the table. The four white-clad Combine assassins crouched low under the window, waiting for their leader's orders. The lieutenant-commander crossed her right index and middle fingers and flicked her wrist around. The commando on point nodded slightly as she drew a flash grenade and quietly rolled it into the room. The Resistance personnel were blinded when the device went off, their vision white and their ears ringing as they were gunned down.

The lieutenant-commander keyed her earpiece, speaking in a cool voice, "Admiral Frasier? This is Vixen One. We're in." She off-handedly pushed the Resistance officer's corpse off the keyboard, slightly annoyed at the specs of the woman's blood on her gloves.

"Understood, Vixen One," said another cool female voice on the other end, "This is Admiral Frasier. Commence Phase Two."

"Understood, commencing Phase Two. Vixen One out."

The squad leader terminated the link and addressed her counterparts. "You have your orders, Vixen Team. Vixen Two and Four, with me. Vixen Three, stay here and keep the room secure. Hide the bodies first."

"Understood."

The three assassins left the room and flitted across the base once more. They reached the main blast doors in thirty seconds. The commandos wasted no time opening the doors, revealing the refreshing night air and the massive assault battalion that waited outside.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: For those of you who are worried, I'm not going to just jump into Highway 17 right away with the next chapter. I will write out the battle for Black Mesa East (in detail) and then probably have a page break or something. The main thing I wanted to get across with this chapter is how the Resistance's heart still beats strong even though they are losing. Also, I wanted to show that not everybody is excited for Freeman's return (General/Major Raymond, for example), thinking he's there to steal their thunder. Again, follows/favorites/reviews (especially reviews, special thanks to _) are always appreciated!

Cheers,

SergeantLawson

7

6. Battle For Black Mesa

7

Chapter 6: Battle for Black Mesa

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Sorry it has taken me so long to finish this chapter. My computer's graphics card went bust and I had to wait for my next

paycheck to get it fixed. Then it was another week before I was finally able to recover my files. Note to self: buy a damned flash drive.

000

I woke to the sound of alarms, shouts and gunfire. _What the hell is going on?_ I had my HEV suit back on in less than two minutes and my weapons locked and loaded. If the Combine wanted Black Mesa East, they would have to kill me first. I was done running. A Resistance fighter appeared in the doorway.

"Dr. Freeman! Come with me; we've got to evacuate High Command!"

"Understood, let's go!" I shouted back over the gunfire.

A shotgun's report resounded from a few meters away and the Resistance fighter crumpled to the floor, the pellets scattered into him. I tapped into the security camera down the hall to see what I was up against. It was just a lone Combine trooper, standard Overwatch military. The only difference was the orange accents and highlights on their armor. The highlights would be colored blue on riflemen, but they were orange on this guy to mark him as a shotgunner.

I stepped out into the hallway and gunned him down, and then stepped over to pop two additional rounds into him for good measure. I relieved him of his SPAS-12 shotgun and accompanying ammunition.

I dove behind a pile of rubble as an enemy squad came around the bend. The five blue-and-grey armored Combine infantrymen forged slowly ahead, covering each other and creating overlapping fields of fire as they scanned the hallways. If I had a grenade I could bag them all in one go. I held my breath as they unsuspectingly approached, waiting for the right moment. One of the soldiers broke the formation to "check" the dead Resistance fighter's body. He planted his boot on the dead man's shoulder blade and put one, two, three rounds in the back of his head. I grit my teeth and my knuckles turned white as I tightened my grip on my shotgun. Their sheer brutality and lack of remorse wasâ€| disturbing.

The soldier's life ended without hesitation, his body sent flying into the wall from the sheer force of the slug. His squad's four remaining members returned fire a split second later, the bullets whittling down my makeshift cover. I tried to scope out their positions but a round hit me in the face the second I popped my head out, dropping my shields from **100** to **92** and forcing me back into my hiding spot. A moment later, the gunfire was replaced by the synthesized groans of dying Combine soldiers.

"Hello? They're dead, you can come out now."

I stepped out. "Thanks for the assist," I said as I appropriated one of the dead troopers' AR2 rifles and a couple of magazines.

"Dr. Freeman? What a surprise," the two men said as they realized who they were talking to. I thought I knew one of themâ€|

"Captain Turner; it's been a while!" We shook hands and he clapped me

on the shoulder.

"Put on a bit of weight, haven't you, Doc?"

Looking at myself I realized he was right; my gear was getting a bit heavy. I dropped my Five-seven and MP7, as well as their ammunition. I rolled my shoulders and sighed with relief. The twenty pounds of gear removed would certainly make me more mobile.

"Oh, this is Sergeant Hall." He gestured to his comrade.

"Well, we're in the shit, aren't we?"

"No kidding. Let's go save the brass."

000

The remnants of Resistance High Command were holed up in the war room, hiding behind makeshift defensive positions. They had flipped the conference table, dragged the podium over, and done whatever else they could to throw together a barricade. They gripped their sidearms with sweaty hands, not from fear, but from quiet resignation. They knew they were probably going to die and had come to peace with that fact. The enemy was too powerful; Freeman was either dead or long gone, and the remaining friendly forces, steeled and valiant as they may be, were being slaughtered.

A gruff voice cut through the tense, silent air. "Scan the area. Shoot anything that moves."

"Affirmative."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Roger that."

"Copy!"

The Resistance officers held their breath, utterly terrified. The battle-hardened men were sweating profusely and holding their handguns and magnums with white-knuckled grips. One of the men, a middle-aged brigadier general, tightly held his eyes shut as he silently mouthed a prayer.

A sickening crack came from the front end of the room. The trooper spun halfway around from the force of the attack before Captain Turner dropped his lifeless body to the deck.

"What the fâ€" I swung my rifle butt into the squad leader's head, knocking him into the wall and cutting off his reply. Sergeant Hall gunned down the other three with a few quick bursts from his M16.

"Clear right!" Turner called.

"Clear left!" Hall echoed.

I nodded. "Roger that. Captain, take overwatch." Turner nodded and took a kneeling position halfway behind the door. He kept his sights trained down the corridor, propping his elbow on his knee to balance

his 12-guage Striker shotgun.

Sergeant Hall cried out in pain, drawing both of our gazes toward him. The Combine squad leader was somehow still moving, and had driven his knife into Hall's left calf. "Goddammit!" The sergeant emptied his handgun's magazine into the persistent soldier, silencing him for good.

"Sergeant, do you need a medic?" I asked.

"No, I can walk."

"Are you sure?"

"He didn't hit an artery, Doc," he insisted, "I'm good."

The remnants of High Command were convinced by now that we were indeed Resistance. The three men and two women finally stood and stretched after more than an hour of immobility. _Only fiveâ€| there should be eight. God, they're tearing us apart!_

"Dr. Freemanâ€| we're glad to see you."

"Likewise, sir."

Turner spoke up and asked the question no one wanted to. "Sir, where is Colonel Hale?"

The senior officer of the group, a four-star general, replied, "She'sâ€| dead."

The captain's world violently ground to a halt. "What?" he almost spat, "How?"

"Turner," I said in a warning tone, but he held a hand.

"Howâ€| didâ€| sheâ€| die?" The words tumbled out of Turner's mouth like lead bricks.

After a deep breath, the general hesitantly replied. "Very well, Captain; you deserve at least that much. She insisted on pulling security watch tonight. An enemy infiltration unit slipped in and killed our patrols, and then they took the security room. The STGs, theyâ€| gunned her down in cold blood."

I put a concerned hand on his shoulder. "Turnerâ€| I know you two were close. I'm sorry." He seemed to relax a little, but he was still beyond anger. In the twelve years that I had known him, I had never seen him like this. Not during the Black Mesa Incident, not when WWII started in Ukraine, not even when the Combine landed and killed six hundred million people in two weeks.

The four-star general stepped over the barricade and locked his eyes with Turner's. "Captain, I have new orders for you. Go out there, and give them hell."

Turner swallowed the knot in his throat. "Aye, aye, sir."

Sergeant Hall asked about one of the other flag officers. "Lieutenant General Anderson, sir?"

"Dead as well, Sergeant." One of the colonels answered with some effort.

"Eliâ€|?" I needed to know, even though I feared the answer.

The general and the rest of High Command looked back and forth at each other with heavy hearts. I finally got my answer after what felt like hours. "MIA. We have no idea where he is or if he's even alive; we've been trying toâ€"

"Contacts in the hallway!" Turner cut loose with his Striker and Hall opened up with his M16.

I addressed the remnants of High Command, "Stay close and stay behind cover. If we get split up, make your way to the extraction point. Do _not_ wait for reinforcements; just keep going. Let's move!"

Turner and Hall rolled underneath the crossfire and behind a pair of steel pillars while I kept the Combine soldiers pinned down. They came around the corner in threes and foursâ€| I lost count after we had killed about twenty of them, and then they just stopped. What were they waiting for? A pair of smoke grenades clattered down the hall and belched a grey cloud cover from wall to wall. We scanned the hall, squinting in silent concentration. The brigadier general suddenly stiffened and fell backwards, a bullet in the center of his forehead. _What the hell? He was behind cover!_

"STG! Ruâ€" Turner crumpled to the floor, clutching his right arm and gritting his teeth. Blood leaked between his fingers.

Hall yelled in rage, spraying the rest of his magazine everywhere in front of him. "WHERE ARE YOU?!" he screamed.

"Hall! Get behind cover!" I shouted, bringing him back to his senses. We all remained motionless, breathing shallowly as if it would help.

A voice echoed across the hallway. "Dodge this, bitch." The report of a .44 magnum cracked through the air. I stood in time to see the assassin fall to the floor, flickering in and out of existence as her active camouflage projectors failed. Alyx put another shot into the commando before lowering her gun. I looked back the other way to see Hall kneeling down by the brigadier general, pressing two of his fingers to the flag officer's neck.

The sergeant met our inquisitive gazes with a slight shake of his head. Hall took a moment to close the general's eyelids before standing again.

Turner broke the somber silence. "Come on. We need to keep moving."

I addressed Alyx, "How bad is it?"

"Not good at all; we're being slaughtered at every corner. There's at least three hundred soldiers in the base. Some fighters made a break for the surface but the Combine have armored vehicles and heavy troops entrenched outside. It's a damn slaughterhouse."

I choked back a knot in my throat. "Howâ€¦ how many of us are left?"

She looked down and closed her eyes. "I don't know. Judging from whatever radio chatter I can pick upâ€¦" Alyx took a shaky breath, "Eighty percent casualties."

I couldn't say or think anything for half of the next minute. When my speech finally returned, I knew I had to save as many lives as possible. "Order a full retreat. Tell everyone to get the hell out of here."

The four-star spoke up. "Now hold on. You don't have authority toâ€¦"

I raised my hand to silence my superior. "General, please. Black Mesa East has fallen; there is no point in further unnecessary loss of life. Our best course of action is to save as many of our people as we can."

He still wouldn't give, and I honestly couldn't blame him. "But maybe there's still a chance toâ€¦"

"Freeman's right, sir," Alyx backed me up, "As much as I hate to admit it, retreating is our best course of action."

His shoulders fell as he saw our reasoning. "Alright. Order the retreat."

Alyx pulled out her radio and I switched on my suit's transmitter. We contacted the remaining squads and told them to pull out. Most of them said they were pinned down or otherwise unable to move, but there was a ray of hope. Switchback, Razor, Hastati, and Crimson squads responded in the affirmative. The four squad leaders said they and their men were already making their way out, and even though they would not be able to rendezvous with us, they would help move the exodus along however they could.

"Squad Bravo Three, possible contact. Moving to verify."

The Combine soldier's report moved us behind cover. We took up positions in perfect ambush dispersal. The enemy gunners' helmet-mounted flashlights played across the walls as they slowly moved in, unaware of the ambush that awaited them. The senior troop gave his men a two-fingered wave. His men silently acknowledged the order, advancing in a crisscross formation and covering each other's backs.

One of the two remaining colonels tapped me on the shoulder. I looked over to see her holding a grenade she had pulled off her gear belt. She raised her eyebrows, but I shook my head and made a small motion toward the rest of us. She nodded and returned the explosive to its clip on her belt, understanding the blast would hit us too.

Everyone held their breath as the quartet of gunmen moved into our fields of fire. I waited until all four soldiers were well within range before giving the signal. Hall was the first to pull the trigger, sending a load of buckshot into the rear man's back. Colonel Erickson gunned down the point soldier with her M1911 handgun. I sent the third guy flying with my SPAS-12, and Alyx put a magnum round

into the side of the last man's head.

I wasted no time in accosting the enemy squad leader. "This attack: what's the endgame?" I briefly glanced at the rank stamped on his right shoulder plate, "And don't play idiot with me, 1st Lieutenant Ramirez. I know you know what's going on."

"This is the endgame," the LT replied flatly.

I wasn't convinced. "Remove your helmet."

He did. I checked for the telltale indoctrination surgery scar, but found nothing on the back of his neck and head. "Alright, I believe you."

"If you were looking for memory replacement scars, you won't find any on me. I can say the same for more and more recruits nowadays."

"Why?"

"President Breen doesn't want millions of mindless drones lumbering around. He wants a well-oiled, intelligent machine capable of thinking independently. You give people convincing leadership, and they'll follow."

Sergeant Hall muttered, "Conniving leadership is more like it." A few of the officers snickered in agreement. I sent a steel glare Hall's way and he took the hint.

"How did you find Black Mesa East? You don't just stumble across a heavily camouflaged bunker."

"You Resistance idiots are tearing each other apart." Does he mean this was— oh hell no!—

"Someone sold us out." It wasn't a question.

The lieutenant sneered. "You catch on quick."

"Who was it?" I demanded. When he didn't answer I pinned him against the wall with my forearm. "Who was it?!"

The enemy officer suddenly went limp, and he was foaming at the mouth. The son of a bitch had a cyanide tooth!

"Move!" Hall dove behind cover, pulling Colonel Erickson with him. Everyone else ran for cover but General Harper and Colonel Farnsworth didn't make it. They fell to the deck, riddled with bullets.

Alyx shouted above the enemy fire, "Gordon!"

"What?"

"We'll have a better chance if we split up! That way at least some of us will make it out!"

"I'll take the officers out of here." But Alyx wouldn't have it.

"No! We can't have all three VIPs together. I'll take Colonel Erickson and Major General Riker. You get out of here with Captain Turner and Sergeant Hall."

"Fine."

She tossed me a satchel. "Here, use this to blow the exit once you're through!"

We waited for a break in the gunfire and then stormed in opposite directions like bats out of hell. Hall and Turner each took another bullet, but thankfully the shots were nonlethal. Hall took it in the arm and Turner's round just barely winged him in the side. We were at the back doors in ten minutes. I tossed the bag to Turner.

"Set the charges; Hall and I will cover you!"

We knocked the Combine soldiers down as they appeared. Finally, Turner called out just as we were running low on ammunition.

"Done!"

"Turner, Hall, come on! Blow the exit once we're clear!"

Turner did not move. "Go."

"What?"

"Get out of here. It's only going to take them a couple of minutes to cut through the rubble once they get here. They'll catch up to us and kill us anyway."

"Turner, what are you doing?"

"I said go! Hall and I will hold them as long as we can!"

"Dammit, Mike, I'm not leaving you!"

He took a deep breath. "Sorry, Doc. I'm not asking." Turner's boot knocked me through the door and several feet out into the rising sunlight. My ears rang from the C4 exploding and I briefly choked on the dust from the rubble.

How the hell can I hope to beat them? For all I know, High Command is dead. We're being crushed. But that changes nothing. I will keep fighting President Breen until one of us is dead.

000

CMB PRIORITY COMMUNICATION

FRM: MIKHAILOVICH, CONRAD; GEN. CMB MILITARY

RECIP: BREEN, WALLACE; PRES. CMB OVERWATCH

SENT: 07.12.2025 19:55 HRS

/BEGIN TRANSMISSION/

President Breen,

It is with wholehearted satisfaction that I report the success of Operation: Troika. We struck fast and precisely where it hurt; your informant certainly was accurate and reliable. Any fighters who still live were driven off in fear of our overwhelming might. They will not stand against us again. The Resistance is a mere nuisance, and while the return of Dr. Gordon Freeman is a troubling issue, one man cannot be a threat to the power of the Combine. The soldiers wereâ€| eager, admittedly, having killed several key Resistance leaders whom could have served as future agents of our cause. I trust implicitly in your leadership and will eagerly await our next major victory against the sick and dying pestilence of the Resistance.

A personal note: I would be most grateful if you could take a few short minutes of your time to commend Admiral Frasier for me. The STG team she sent in performed flawlessly.

Sincerely yours,

GEN Conrad Mikhailovich

000

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Well that's chapter six, everyone; I hope you enjoyed! Right off the bat I want to clear something up. I don't know if it was chapter four or five, but one of those says something like "(special thanks to _)". I apologize for that; I meant to put some actual thanks where the underscore was, but I forgot. -- So _now_, before I forget _again_, special thanks to The Nihilanth (I hope I'm spelling that correctly), Silverlynx13, Houndeye, and a couple of guests. I really can't say how much your reviews help me out; Houndeye in particular gave me a great suggestion of cutting down on the unnecessary weapon details, among other things.

P.S. Could somebody please PM me about how to make those grey lines? The light gray ones that stretch all the way across the page? I'd rather use those as breaks than triple zeroes.

Cheers,

7

SergeantLawson

7. Highway 17 (Part 1)

Chapter 7: Highway 17 (Part 1)

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** I know it's been months since I last posted anything, and I apologize for the unusually long wait. My schedule's been smoked out this summer, and I've barely had time to work on Uprising for the past month and a half. Now though, I'm basically home free until my Junior year starts on the 9th of September. I know I am going to make Highway 17 a very, very long chapter. I originally planned to post it in a massive brick when I got done, but as I kept writing I realized it would be way over 7K words, so I thought I would start posting it in more-digestible 3K-4K chunks.

That being said, this will be the first of (probably) three parts of Highway 17. Again, sorry for the long wait. Enjoy!

000

In response to GEN Mikhailovich,

_ I am most impressed with our overwhelming victory at Black Mesa East, and commendations are certainly in order. However, I fail to see how Freeman has not yet been confirmed dead, and how your forces allowed two members of the enemy High Command to escape with Eli Vance's daughter. As a gesture of gratitude for your exceptional command of Black Mesa's invasion, I will grant you the benefit of doubt and not hold these temporary inconveniences against you. Nonetheless, I still expect this disturbance to be rectified in a timely manner. If Freeman is allowed to slip away there is no telling how much damage may be done. We cannot allow that to happen. I expect a full report on your progress soon._

_ Sincerely,_

_ Wallace Breen, Pres. CMB Overwatch_

000

I sat up and gave my senses a moment to reorient before I stood. Once I was upright I checked myself for injuries. As my vision cleared I realized I was not outside of Black Mesa East; but standing in a steel corridor. Looking down, it became apparent I was wearing my lab coat, tan slacks, and tie. I glanced to my left and saw the Black Mesa logo; a black shark fin jutting into a black circle.

The steel blast door parted in front of me and revealed the Black Mesa lobby, populated with my co-workers going about their business. The security guard behind the desk greeted me and signed me in. Amid all this, I could sense something was out of place. Something wasâ€¦ off.

I leaned over the desk and cleared my throat. "Excuse me?"

The guard glanced up from his stack of paperwork. "You're signed in, Dr. Freeman. You're good to go."

"What day is it?"

The security guard cocked his head slightly. "Tuesday."

"The _date_."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "Uhâ€¦ it's the 15th of May."

"The year; what _year_?"

At this the guard laid his pen down and sat up, finally giving me his full attention. "Dr. Freeman, are you feeling alright?"

"The year," I said impatiently.

He paused for a moment, and then: "2015."

_May 15__th__, 2015â€¦| oh shit!_

Nobody had time to react when the HECU squad rounded the corner and opened fire. Papers, clipboards and briefcases flew into the air as their owners were shot down. The guard had cleared his Glock-18 halfway out of its holster before a burst of gunfire pinned him back into his seat. I blacked out just before the troopers opened fire on me.

000

My ears rang and my vision was blurred. I blinked several times to help my vision refocus and coughed the dust out of my lungs. I rolled my head to the left and saw a trio of Combine speeders roll up and stop. Each speeder carried two soldiers; a driver and a passenger on the rear. The passengers quickly moved to secure the area while the drivers dismounted. All six soldiers immediately noticed me, but it apparently looked as if I were still out cold because they did not open fire.

"What should we do with this one?" asked one of the soldiers once they had gathered around me.

"Pack him up." I presumed that was the squad leader.

"Sergeant, we don't have the means to transport anything more than we already have."

"Alright. Terminate him."

"Roger that."

I knew I would have less than a half-second to react. I listened carefully for the sound of fatigues swishing against body armor and pinpointed the shooter. I threw my hand straight up, snagged the rifle's barrel and yanked the weapon sideways in the split second before he pulled the trigger. His partner took the bullet in the leg and lost his balance. Before anyone could react I killed the squad leader with my .357 and sprang to my feet. I lined up on the next soldier and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

I ditched the gun and charged the soldier to my left, taking fire before he met me halfway. He swung at my face, but I dodged to the side and drove my heel into his kneecap. A series of cracks resounded through the air and the soldier fell over backwards. I turned and parried a series of blows from another soldier, but a few punches landed anyway. I ignored the minor throbs of pain and slammed my forearm into his throat, leaving him to find his breath. The first trooper was trying to push himself up but I wouldn't let him. I kicked him in the side of the head, putting him down for good.

Another soldier caught me in a headlock while a third landed a flurry of blows. I kicked the grunt before me in the shins and stomped on my captor's foot. Taking advantage of the brief opportunity, I dropped to one knee and flipped the trooper over my shoulder. He landed on the asphalt with a smack. My follow-up kick cracked two of his ribs. He wouldn't be getting up for a while. The third trooper tried to

drop me with his Five-seveN, but the rounds pinged off my shields. I grabbed his wrist, and jammed the heel of my palm into his elbow. He cried out as his arm bent the wrong way and dropped to his knees. His good arm raised in submission.

That makes fiveâ€¦| where's the sixth?

A searing, agonizing pain flared through my side. My shields were designed to deflect bullets and other high-speed objects, not the trooper's combat knife. The blade came away bloody and the grunt went for an overhand killing strike. I brought my forearm up against his and parried the blow. We grappled and fought at point-blank range, struggling for control of the knife. He was noticeably stronger than his companions, easily making me fight on my back foot. I blocked his relentless assault as best as I could, but a kick to the stomach sent me flying. Thinking quickly, I used the momentum of my fall to roll backwards. Now supported by my arms, I sprang off the ground and met the charging soldier head-on, planting a boot in his stomach and another in his chest. The collision put him in turn on the pavement, with me on top of him. I ripped the knife from his hand before he could react and used it to finish him off.

Man, that guy had an attitude problem, I thought to myself.

I stood, brushed myself off and retrieved my .357 from the ground, and then proceeded to gun down the surviving soldiers. The enemy had taken another three thousand lives in the span of a few hours, and any hesitation I harbored for killing the Combine had died with them. I knew most of the men and women at Black Mesa East personally; the majority of them were my former co-workers whom had survived the horrors of the Black Mesa Incident and the Seven-Hour War. And now they were gone.

I was rummaging through the fallen squad's packs for a medical kit, or at least something to stitch up my wound, when I felt the ground begin to shake. When I looked up, the sky was stained with massive blotches of orange in a triangle around Black Mesa East. After about ten seconds, the orange was slowly taken over by a glaring bright blue. _What the hell?_ I activated my suit's binoculars, turned them up to the maximum setting, and my vision jumped forward twenty times. As the picture cleared up, my throat went dry. _No. It can't be._

000

Fleet Admiral Karen Frasier stood on the bridge of her carrier, the _Razor's Kiss_, gazing out at the vast expanse of stars before her. The tall, middle-aged, brown-haired woman marveled at the universe's diverse beauty. _The sky certainly is not the limit,_ she thought. A lieutenant cleared his throat and addressed her from a respectful distance.

"Admiral?"

Frasier turned her head to the side. "Yes, lieutenant?"

"Ma'am, I was ordered to report directly to you. All others are present and accounted for, ma'am."

The flag officer nodded slightly. "Very well, lieutenant. Dismissed."

The junior officer snapped to attention and delivered a crisp salute before promptly disappearing.

"Captain Gomez, you have the bridge."

The captain's response was almost instantaneous, "Aye, aye, ma'am."

"Hold current position and await further orders."

The captain repeated his superior's order, "Hold position and await further orders, aye."

Admiral Frasier did an about-face and marched off the bridge. She knew all two kilometers of her ship by heart, so navigating to the conference room was a simple task. It only took her five minutes to traverse a third of the massive vessel. The two honor guards posted outside saluted the admiral when she arrived at the conference room. Its holographic smart lock detected her Combine ID chip and confirmed her rank. Once satisfied, the lock's color changed from red to green, and the door parted in front of her.

Her ship's conference room was designed with both aesthetics and utility in mind. Five of the room's eight stuffed leather chairs were occupied with the meeting's other attendees. The table in the center of the room had a glass top with a holographic projector beneath it. The far wall was occupied with a massive painting. The art was modeled after one of the Second World War's most famous photographs: a squad of American infantrymen lifting a U.S. flag at Iwo Jima's summit. Although it was modeled after the photograph, the painting itself was very different. Gone were the American GIs, the stars and stripes, and the Iwo Jima backdrop. Instead, an equal number of Overwatch soldiers heaved a Combine flag atop the UN building.

"Admiral on deck!" shouted one of the honor guards inside, bringing himself and his five companions to attention.

"At ease," ordered Frasier. She turned to the summit's attendees, nodding at each one as she addressed them in turn, "General Mikhailovich, General Roland, Major General Blake, Commander Thatcher, Commissioner Thorn." The red-haired Commissioner made a small noise, probably due to being mentioned last. The admiral continued without a reaction. "I see everyone is present; shall we begin?"

Overwatch's military commanders nodded in consent, and Frasier tapped a button on her datapad. The lights dimmed and a holographic replica of Black Mesa East fizzled into view. "This is Black Mesa East, six hours ago. Estimated population: three thousand. As we all know, the Resistance is like a colony of rats. You can kill off the small groups as they appear, but it does no good; they will simply continue to multiply and become exponentially more dangerous. So, the question is: how do you get rid of them?"

"By destroying the nest," offered one of the men.

Frasier nodded, "Precisely. And that, people, is exactly what we have done." She swiped her finger across her datapad. The image became slightly distorted for a few seconds, its clarity returning to

reveal the base's present state. "This is Black Mesa East, in the present. Estimated population: two hundred. This is damn good work; exactly what I like to see." The fleet admiral paused for a moment, allowing her words to sink in, "And to whom do we owe our recognition for this victory?" The officers turned their heads towards General Mikhailovich.

The admiral continued, "That is only partially correct." She noticed the quizzical looks pointed at her, "While General Mikhailovich's assault on the enemy compound dealt the killing blow, it was Commissioner Thorn who provided him the opportunity for such a strike."

Mikhailovich stood violently, almost knocking away his chair. "Admiral, if I mayâ€"

Frasier cut him off at the knees, "No, General, you may not. Although Civil Protection's failure to apprehend Freeman is certainly worthy of attention, it is equally noteworthy that the CPIF, not to mention their mainstream counterparts, do not receive training remotely comparable to our active-duty military. Freeman is, without question, the most battle-hardened fighter the Resistance has; and as such, the police apprehending or even slowing him is an unrealistic vision."

The general persisted, "That still does not explainâ€"

Frasier narrowed her eyes, "Do not forget whose ship you are on, General. Your home turf is two hundred miles below us, and at the moment I have no objections to sending you home." Mikhailovich took his seat without another word.

"Now, as I stated before, the police apprehending or even slowing Freeman is an unrealistic vision. However, our good Commissioner did succeed in tracking Freeman down to the rat's nest. In doing so, we were finally able to pin down the location of Black Mesa East, allowing General Mikhailovich to move in and take them out." Murmurs of agreement briefly occupied the room, save for Mikhailovich.

"All arguments aside, we must move on to the purpose of this meeting." Her fingers danced across her datapad, and the holographic display phased out of existence. The other officers flinched and squinted when the lights came back on. Their discomfort made a smile tug at the corners of Frasier's lips, "The President has requested a full SITREP (Situation Report) within the next hour, and that is what I intend upon giving him. Deployed assets, resource expenditure, friendly and hostile casualties, everything within the past forty-eight hours." Frasier turned to Mikhailovich once more, the previous hostilities now gone.

The general cleared his throat before speaking, "Firstly, there is an error which requires correcting. Admiral, I mean no disrespect, but your estimations are incorrect."

"Enlighten me," said Frasier in a slightly bored tone.

"Black Mesa's pre-assault population statistics are well above three thousand. As of a few minutes ago, my men estimated the population at just below five thousand, and that number is still climbing."

Major General Blake spoke up, "General, how can it be 'still climbing,' as you put it?"

Mikhailovich nodded, "Of course, I should elaborate. It seems our scans of Black Mesa failed to capture the entire base. Put simply, my troops are still trying to discern how deep the rabbit hole goes."

Frasier waited for a few seconds before replying; "Thank you for the amendment, General. However, Black Mesa's depth is no longer a concern. Pull your men out."

Mikhailovich's lip twitched, "Admiral, with all due respect, I am in command of Overwatch land-based forces. NAVCOM (Naval Command) has no authority over my operations."

Frasier briefly held up a hand. "Allow me to amend my previous statement. These orders came from the President himself."

The general raised an eyebrow, "I received no such orders."

"That is because the order came in twenty minutes before this summit began. The President knew our military leaders would be aboard the Razor's Kiss, and he decided sending the orders to me so I could relay them to you would be more efficient than waiting for you to return planet side."

Mikhailovich nodded and Frasier moved on, "Now that that has been rectified, I need detailed and precise statistics. General, what assets have you deployed to the assault?"

Mikhailovich spoke while looking down at his datapad, occasionally glancing up at the rest of the commanders. "Before and during the battle, we had a quarter of a tank brigade and a heavy infantry battalion entrenched outside, as well as three companies and one platoon inside the base, the latter of which was using experimental technology."

"Such as?" inquired General Roland.

"Helmet-mounted short-range motion trackers, dual-layer reactive armor, and AR3 weapons."

Thorn cleared his throat, "General, could you elaborate on this 'AR3' model?"

"Certainly. We are all familiar with the AR2 and its drawbacks, I presume?"

"Drawbacks?" inquired Commander Thatcher, the head of the STG division.

"Yes. The AR2, unlike other firearms, is not magazine-fed. It uses a plutonium power cell as its energy source and its ammunition. Each time the firing pin strikes the cell; a small plutonium projectile is launched. Exactly how this is done lies out of my field of expertise, I'm afraid. Now, the drawbacks I mentioned before are twofold. The power cell is highly unstable, and must be ejected after every thirty rounds fired to avoid rupturing the radioactive cell. This leads to the other disadvantage: several cells must be carried in the weapon's

'hopper' of sorts to ensure it has adequate ammunition."

"Get to the point, Mikhailovich," urged General Roland.

"In short, the AR3 is a much lighter and more efficient version of the AR2. The real improvement was that our scientists figured out how to stabilize its power source. Not one single cell has had to be ejected yet."

"Thank you, Mikhailovich," breathed Roland.

Frasier shifted to face Roland, "General Roland, it is my understanding that Airwatch has only begun committing forces to the effort in a hunter-killer role after the assault. Is that correct?"

"Yes. At the present, we have scrambled two flights of gunships, a squadron of Hunter-Choppers and a wing of A10 Warthogs."

"Very well. Order your forces to pull out as well."

"Admiral?"

"Confer with the President if you wish. You will only waste everyone's time."

Major General Blake raised a finger, "Admiral, why are we pulling out?"

Frasier turned to exit the room. "Follow me, and I will show you."

000

I blinked several times, making sure I saw what I thought I saw. I was not mistaken. The Combine Navy was back, shields flaring as the vessels re-entered the lower atmosphere, seven miles above where I stood. The first two ships to descend were heavy cruisers. The vessels were each a kilometer in length, heavily armored, and riddled with deck guns that could rip through just about anything. I scanned around with my binoculars, searching for their names. The Executioner and the Iron Fist. Two large laser pointers appeared on the ground, on top of Black Mesa East. What were they doing?

I had my answer when the third ship descended into view thirty seconds later. The Razor's Kiss was a truly menacing sight, over two kilometers in length from bow to stern. I realized that we would either have to invade or destroy the massive vessel if we were going to take Earth back. I could see no feasible method of pulling it off, mainly because the Resistance had no air power. Even if we managed to take over one of the smaller vessels, the carrier's Magnetic Accelerator Cannons would tear us apart. A conventional aircraft assault would meet with failure as well; the Razor's Kiss was equipped with auto-targeting air defense lasers. Its hangar bays could launch hundreds of gunships, helicopters, fighters and bombers in minutes. Its belly was honeycombed with JP-61 Scorpion anti-ground missiles. The behemoth was heavily shielded from stem to stern, and nothing I knew of could get through them. Even if we penetrated the shields, there was still the armor to deal with: three feet of

Titanium-A battleplate. The flanks were lined with HK-40 long-range air-to-air cluster-missiles.

I would find a way. I always did.

The MAC weapons on the _Razor's Kiss_ began to glow red.

000

Combine High Command stood on the carrier's bridge, waiting to see what Admiral Frasier had in mind. The five-star stood a few feet forward from her counterparts, calm and patient.

"Communications SITREP," she said coolly.

The ensign spun in his chair to face her, "_Executioner_ and _Iron Fist_ report target is painted, Admiral."

Frasier nodded, "Very well. Fire control SITREP."

The lieutenant's fingers played around on various displays and readouts as he spoke. "Round is primed. Electromagnetsâ€| energized. MAC weapon ready."

"Very well. Fire on my mark."

"Fire on your mark, aye."

Frasier turned to address her comrades. "Today is a day to remember. In a few short hours, we have eradicated the nexus of the Resistance and exterminated its leaders. Now, we will wipe the symbol of their "freedom" off the face of the Earth. Without their base of operations to rally behind, the Resistance will fall swiftly." She turned her head to speak directly to Mikhailovich and Roland, "General Mikhailovich, General Roland, are your forces clear of the area?"

The two men nodded.

"Fire control, arm MAC weapon."

"Arm MAC weapon, aye."

Silence enveloped the bridge as the crew turned to observe the forward view screens.

"Fire."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Hope this was enough to keep the riots at bay for a few days. :p Anyway, a bloody hand-to-hand scene, a few more OC's, and I ended it on a cliffhanger like a douchebag. As always, feedback, suggestions, and booty calls *ahem-cough-ahem* â€|sorry what?â€| are always appreciated. Expect part two in two or three weeks.

Cheers!

SergeantLawson

8. Highway 17 (Part 2)

6

Chapter 8: Highway 17 (Part 2)

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Just so you're aware, this is not the rest of the canonical Highway 17. I did some math and realized the full chapter would be well over 10K words, and I simply don't have the time (or the attention span) to pull a Water Hazard all over again. I know the vehicle sequences were a big part of Half-Life 2 and I'm sorry I won't be including the driving sequence. It's not a decision I wanted to make, but it's one that had to be made. I'm going to do my best to make it up to you guys in Nova Prospekt and beyond. This is a short_er chapter, around 2.5K words, and it's that short because my goal here was just to round out my plans for Highway 17. Enjoy!

000

I started running as soon as I saw the MAC gun's glow, keeping pressure on my wound and praying that the pilots hadn't locked down their speeders. My prayers were answered as the engine hummed to life. I twisted the right handlebar forward, and the speeder took off. I knew I didn't have a chance of achieving minimum safe distance in time, so I was just trying to get as far away as I could.

The MAC gun fired.

The slug impacted and bored into the ground, collapsing Black Mesa East inwards around it. The EMP from the slug hit before the shockwave, so my speeder, shields, and HUD shut down a few seconds before the vehicle and I were ripped fifteen feet into the air. I hit the ground hard, and I instantly knew my shoulder was dislocated and my ankle was broken. The speeder flipped through the air and landed across my legs, crushing the bones beneath its heavy weight. I felt myself slipping into shock before I blacked out.

"Lieutenant! I've got someone over here!"

The voices were muffled and all I could see was a blur. Their voices weren't scrambled and synthesized, so I knew they were Resistance.

"Waitâ€¦ is that Gordon Freeman?" My ears perked up at the sound of my name. All I could manage to do was roll my head and groan.

"Holy shit, he's alive! Malone, get the jeep over here!"

"On it!"

"Williams, radio back to the triage center! Let them know we've got a condition red VIP and make sure they're ready when we get back!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Colonel Freeman, can you hear me?" I groaned again. The lieutenant spoke slowly and clearly, "You're safe. We're with the Resistance and we have a triage center set up nearby. We're taking you there now."

I blacked out again.

A voice faded into my gradually returning hearing, "Sir, he's waking up! I can't believe he pulled through."

A second voice echoed from my right as my vision came back into focus, "Take it easy, sir. You've been out for quite a while."

I slowly sat up and looked myself over. I could see no signs of the fractures and internal bleeding I must have suffered after such an impact. To my surprise, I had come away fine from something that would take months of recovery. My first question was: "How?"

The man to my left wore a medic's red cross armband and was the first one to speak, "Captured Combine medical technology. It enables highly accelerated tissue regeneration and knits bones in under an hour if the fragments are properly aligned." He paused, and then added, "You've made a full recovery, sir. You shouldn't notice any differences from before the impact."

"Thanks, doc, I appreciate it. How long was I out?"

"Just under 72 hours," replied the medic, "It would have been significantly longer had Lieutenant Chamberlain not found you so quickly."

I extended my arm to the lieutenant and we shook hands, "You saved my life, Chamberlain. I owe you one."

"Just doing my job, Colonel."

I paused before continuing. "I need casualty statistics; get me up to speed."

The lieutenant took a more somber tone, "It's not looking good, sir. The MAC round probably vaporized everyone still inside Black Mesa East, and twenty-four hours ago we've started going off of that assumption. The numbers are still shifting up and down but as of two hours ago, the estimates stand at two thousand five hundred confirmed dead and some fifteen-hundred-odd MIA."

"Survivors?"

Chamberlain took a deep, shaky breath, "Five hundred at best, and that number has remained stagnant since forty-eight hours ago."

"My God. What's the word on the rest of High Command?"

"Captain Vance reported the exfil was successful. Colonel Erickson and Major General Riker are both alive and well."

"Is Eli still MIA?"

"I think it would be best for Captain Vance to brief you on that particular matter."

"Is she here?"

"Negative. We don't know exactly where she and her fighters are, but she's tried to reach you multiple times. Said she had something she could only trust you with."

"I'll see if I can reach her from my suit's transmitter."

I was back in my HEV suit and outside in less than three minutes. I turned to the built-in control pad on my left forearm and tried to put a vid call through to Alyx. The call came through and filled most of my HUD. The feed was grainy and it jumped from time to time, telltale signs of a hasty and improvised set-up.

Alyx was motioning and shouting orders. "Keep fire on that doorway! No one gets through!" She aimed her .44 magnum at something off the screen and fired twice. The Combine soldier she'd hit tumbled through the camera's field of view as he fell to the deck. Alyx planted her boot in his back, leveled her magnum at the back of the trooper's head, and pulled the trigger. "Dammit, Peters, I said keep them off me!"

"On it, boss," said a fighter with a shaved head and a scar above his ear. He adjusted his grip on his SCAR-H assault rifle and continued firing at unseen targets. Alyx glanced at the camera and her eyes lit up.

"Gordon! Glad you're okay."

I nodded, "Thanks. Glad to hear the exfil was a success. What's the word on Eli?"

She took a deep breath through her nose. "My father's been captured by the Combine. They're holding him at Nova Prospekt."

My response was barely audible, "Shit."

"Exactly. It used to be a high-security prison. It'sâ€¦ something much worse now. We can't get an assault team within half a klick of the walls before they're slaughtered."

She didn't have to ask twice. "Alright. What am I going up against?"

"I hate to say it, but once you hit the beachhead you'll be flying blind. We have floor plans and blueprints, but we both know how the Combine like to gut and restructure everything; especially their main facilities like Nova Prospekt."

"Will I have any support going in?"

"No. Too much clutter on their sensors."

"I don't like thisâ€¦ but what's the game plan?"

"Nova Prospekt is about thirty klicks west from you. I've already ordered the triage center to lend you one of their buggies, so transportation is not a concern. There's a Resistance outpost just outside their perimeter line. _If_ they haven't been killed, they

will give you a full SITREP of what we have on Nova Prospekt."

"Got it. Thanks."

"Gordon?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful. I haven't driven the coast in years but I don't have reason to believe it's become any safer."

"Alyx, we'll get your father back. And then, somehowâ€¦ they are going to pay for what they have done."

"You're right. I know if anyone can handle this, it's you. Now go; there's no time to lose!"

I cut the vid link and took a moment to gaze out at the receding Atlantic Ocean. Sighing inwardly and shaking my head, I thought, _Nova Prospektâ€¦ this day keeps getting better and better._

I called back inside, "Lieutenant!"

"Sir!" the LT came running.

"Chamberlain, I need one of your buggies fueled, armed, and ready to go _yesterday_."

The lieutenant nodded, "Yes sir; I'll take care of it. Williams! Malone! Front and center on the double!"

A pair of acknowledgments came from the triage center and the fighters emerged from the complex. They each saluted us before sounding off, "Sir, reporting as ordered, sir!"

"Prep transport Alpha-4 for departure; fuel, ammo, tires, everything. I want it done in ten, understood?"

Malone responded, "Roger that, sir!" before they disappeared.

Chamberlain turned to face me once again. "Sir, if I may ask, where are you going?"

"Nova Prospekt; they're holding Eli Vance there. I'm going to get in, get him and any other Resistance personnel out, and thenâ€¦ I'm going to kill every last Combine soldier there."

Chamberlain raised an eyebrow, "Sir, are youâ€¦"

I cut him off, "Chamberlain, I'm done running. I'm done hiding. We have to take the fight to them." I felt my voice rising, "Since those bastards have landed, all we've ever done is _survive_. Scrounging for anything we can find, living off the essentials. I don't want to survive, I want to _live_. If we don't strike now, and fast, they will crush us for good. I am going to Nova Prospekt, not just to get our leader out, and not just to kill a few dozen Combine soldiers. I am going there to send a message, to show them why you don't fuck with the Resistance! Then we take City 17, and then it's on to the Citadel. It's time to cut the head off the enemy once and for all,

Lieutenant!" I inhaled deeply through my nose, calming myself down. I then leveled my fiery gaze with Lieutenant Chamberlain and uttered six cold words, "It's time to kill the President."

000

Corporal Malone greeted me by the buggy, "Colonel, she's all yours."

"What kind of capabilities does this thing have, Malone?"

The corporal proudly patted the buggy's engine compartment, "This baby's got 550 horsepower under the hood, so she'll outrun pretty much anything groundside except Combine speeders. That, coupled with the tires, and she's got enough power and traction to climb a mountain. The tires and the engine are both armored, so you're safe from everything except fifties. I just fitted a munitions crate full of AR2 cells to the back; you should have more firepower than you'll ever need. And if you'll take a look inside the cabin—" Malone stepped aside as I knelt down and inspected the interior, "—you'll notice an AT-4 laser-guided rocket launcher, in case you run into any Combine armor. The crate next to it has six warheads inside. Armor-plated as well, so you don't have to worry about rounds hitting the rockets. She won't turn or stop on a dime, but she'll get you there."

"Corporal, what about the weapon strapped to the side? What exactly am I looking at here?"

"Colonel, I believe you're familiar with the Tau Cannon?"

"Yes," I replied.

The Tau Cannon was a highly advanced concept plasma weapon developed at Black Mesa, unlike anything before it. The only drawback was efficiency. The cannon had to vent superheated plasma and recharge between each shot. Not only did venting the plasma pose a serious danger to the user, but the recharging sequence also brought the weapon's rate of fire down to about twenty shots per minute, though those shots were extremely powerful. The ammunition supply was very limited as well. As with countless other concepts in the various fields of science, it was a very outstanding idea, but a very inefficient prototype. Development still continued, though, and it could have gone into mass production given a few more years of work—but then April 15th, 2015 happened, and the world changed forever.

Malone snapped the weapon off the magnetic strip and almost ceremoniously handed it to me. "Meet the Tau Cannon Mk II."

The gun was somewhere between the size of an assault carbine and a light machine gun, while surprisingly lighter than either one. The mercury-colored weapon was smooth and almost completely rounded, with small blue LED lights running along its surface. I could see nowhere to insert a magazine, power cell, or any source of ammunition. That meant—

"My God—they actually did it, didn't they?"

Malone took a stab at what I was thinking and nailed it, "Created a

standalone embedded power source that requires no maintenance, reloading, or recharging whatsoever? Yes."

"How does it vent the discharged plasma?"

"Doesn't need to anymore. I don't know how, but they managed to figure out how to internally cool and recycle the expunged plasma. The result was infinite ammunition."

"What's the rate of fire?"

The corporal grinned. "How fast can you squeeze a trigger?"

Something on the other side of the gun caught my eye. Upon closer inspection it proved to be a Combine insignia with a red circle around it and a line drawn through.

I chuckled. "Let me guess: 'who ya gonna call?' "

"Actually, no; we nicked this baby from one of their research labs."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really? Nice job; those places are heavily guarded."

Malone looked suddenly downcast, "Yeah. We lost a lot of good people getting that gun. I hope it was worth it."

I put a hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "Malone, we've lost too many good people in this war. Starting tonight, that's going to change. Tonight we go on the offensive and assault Nova Prospekt. Whether or not I succeed doesn't matter. I need you to give a message to Lieutenant Chamberlain. You're going to want to record it."

Malone pulled out his datapad and his fingers hovered over the audio record button.

I gave him what could very well be my last words to the Resistance. Once I was done reciting my speech I gave him another set of orders, "Tell the Lieutenant to relay that speech to everyone."

"Everyone, sir?"

I nodded. "Everyone; the entire Resistance. Tomorrow we fight, or we die."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Another one finalized and fired off into the internet. A side note for people who want to comment on my inaccuracies with the Tau Cannon Mk I: I'm talking about the "secondary" fire mode, the one where it has to charge up for a few seconds. On a different topic, I want to give a shout out to The Mezzerino (hope I'm spelling it right) for his continued support of Uprising; several things in this story's future will only exist thanks to you. He also "took some ideas from my fic for his own," which I take as a massive compliment. If you have the time, check out his profile! I'm going to jump straight to the prison beachheads in

the next chapter. When that next chapter will be posted, I don't know.

Cheers!

SergeantLawson

9. Nova Prospekt (Part 1)

8

Chapter 9: Nova Prospekt (Part 1)

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** I won't talk too long this time, because I don't have much to say. This chapter is the buildup leading to Nova Prospekt, and it is nowhere near the entire chapter. If things go according to plan, Nova Prospekt will be even longer than Highway 17. Enjoy, and don't forget to hit that fav button!

000

I had been driving for hours and the buggy's fuel tank was down to fumes and vapors. The sun was touching the hilltops as I pulled up to the Resistance camp and cut my vehicle's engine. The camp was a group of small ruined buildings, battered and crumbling. Directly to the left there was an obvious two-car garage. To my right and a bit further down was an armory, judging by the pair of watchful armed sentries. The middle building looked like it had been a store of some kind. From the panning security cameras to the door sentries and roving patrols, this had to be the command center. A fighter jogged up and saluted me. I returned the gesture and asked who she was.

"First Sergeant Allers, sir. I'm the camp's lead mechanic and tech specialist."

I nodded, "Where's your CO?"

"I'll take you to the major in a moment, sir, but right now we need to get your vehicle under cover. We just overheard some radio chatter; they're looking for it."

"Alright. Help me move this thing." We pushed my buggy into the garage and locked up its systems. Allers noticed the launcher in the cabin and its munitions crate. She cocked an eyebrow.

"How did you get your hands on an AT-4?"

"A fighter at a triage center gave it to me. I ran into some armor on the way here so I'm out of rockets. I hate to ask, but do you have any spares?"

Allers shrugged, "I couldn't tell you. The CO will get you outfitted and find you a bunk."

"I'm not staying."

The mechanic frowned. "I don't follow. If you're not staying, then why turn in your vehicle?"

I waved the question aside, "I don't have time to explain. Just tell me where your CO is."

"He's inside the CC (Command Center), sir. Give the sentries your name and designation and they should let you in."

"Thanks, Allers."

I strode purposefully down the cracked and broken street, returning salutes and greetings as I continued on my way. When I arrived at the CC I saw security was extremely tight, undoubtedly due to the fall of Black Mesa East four days ago. Normally Resistance personnel just have to make do with a used flak jacket and whatever weapons were issued to them, but that was not the case with these two individuals. They were each protected with a Kevlar-IV vest and riot helmet with night vision goggles attached to them. Each man held an AN-94 assault rifle with a "Prisma" holographic sight and a GP25 grenade launcher under the barrel. Their gear belts carried four HE (High Explosive) grenades. Their sidearms were P99 handguns with 12-round magazines.

The Combine were definitely screwing with the wrong people.

As I approached I expected the watchmen to halt me or demand identification. Just when I was about to ID myself, the guards came to attention and held their rifles straight up and down, six inches from their chests. The U.S. armed forces' honor guard salute.

I saluted in return, "Carry on."

"Sir."

I found the CO inside the command center. He was in his early thirties, but fatigue and the burdens of war made him look a decade older. His light brown hair was visibly greasy, and rough stubble was growing along his jawline and upper lip. His eyes were slightly bloodshot and bags had formed underneath them. He couldn't have gotten more than a few hours of sleep since Black Mesa East's downfall.

I saluted first this time despite my rank, due to his position as the commanding officer. It was a Resistance custom.

"Colonel Freeman! I'm Major Grey, garrison commander. Glad you could make it." He extended his hand and I shook it.

"I almost didn't. Hostile armor is combing Highway 17, looking for survivors."

"That's new. What kind of armor are we looking at here?"

"Everything short of mobile artillery and tanks. Tell your people to take alternate cross-country routes for the next ninety-six hours; the Combine should relocate their heavy resources by then."

"I'll take care of it tomorrow morning." He paused, and then added, "They hit Black Mesa hard?"

I took a deep breath, "Yeahâ€¦"

The major realized he had hit something personal and hurriedly made an effort to change the subject, "My people will be glad to see you made it out."

"Major, I hate to be blunt, but we have a situation."

"Whatever it is, sir, we can handle it."

"RENEGADE is being held inside Nova Prospekt."

"They've got Eli?"

"Yes. And I have a plan to get him out."

"What do you need me to do, sir?"

"Muster your troops outside the CC. Leave the rest to me."

"Consider it done." The CO himself went running to the berthing area to round up his fighters. They were all clustered around the command center in two minutes flat. I needed to get moving as soon as possible, so I went straight military. There were about fifty of themâ€| that meant a company.

"COMPANY, FALL IN!"

It only took them seven seconds to form two perfectly spaced five-by-five formations. Each group had two leaders, who were three meters forward from their troops.

"COMPANY, REPORT!"

The senior platoon officer on the right pivoted towards me and saluted. "Alpha Platoon, all present, sir!"

"Very well." I returned the salute before turning to the other platoon. Their leader faced me, saluted, and reported in a similar manner. I acknowledged the report and put the fighters at ease.

"I hate yelling." The fighters grinned and chuckled. I took a breath before switching gears, "We don't have much time, so I'm going to cut to the chase. We have a confirmed lock on Eli Vance's position; the only problem is that the signal came from the heart of Nova Prospekt." I saw slumped shoulders and downcast looks. "However, that will not stop us. Tonight, we are infiltrating their impregnable prison and freeing not only our leader, but every other prisoner there as well. Make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen, this is the most dangerous mission the Resistance has ever undertaken since its formation ten years ago. We cannot attack conventionally, and I cannot go in alone. This will more than likely be a one-way tripâ€| but I'm asking for volunteers."

Every single hand shot skyward without hesitation.

"I need a small, elite team; no more than four people. Who's the best shot here?"

Major Grey answered, "Lieutenant Rogers! Step forward." A man with close-cropped red hair and green eyes stepped out of his formation

and joined us up front.

"I need a good scout. Someone who can move and kill silently and quickly."

"Sergeant Owens! Step forward." The fighter was in his late twenties and appeared to be of Native American descent. Clearly excited to be selected for the op, he practically skipped to join his comrade up front.

I had already come to a decision on the final team member. "Allers, you're coming too."

She hesitated to come forward. "Me?"

"Yes," I affirmed with a nod, "You're the best engineer here, and from what I've heard, you know just as much about Combine technology as Captain Vance herself."

"I'm honored, Colonel." She blushed slightly as she came to the front.

I addressed the entire company once more, "Those who have been selected, follow me to the CC. The rest of you, dismissed!" The company stepped backwards, did an about-face, and dispersed.

I returned the honor guards' salutes as I returned to the CC with my fire team in tow. Once inside, I asked Major Grey if he had a map of Nova Prospekt's beachheads. He responded in the affirmative, but said it was "somewhat outdated."

"Just how outdated are we talking about here?"

"Around twenty-five or thirty years."

I clenched my fist, "Damn it." Thirty years was well before the invasion, and pre-invasion maps would not do me any good.

"What's the plan now, sir?" asked Lieutenant Rogers.

"As much as I hate to admit it, we now have to go in blind. However, we can compensate for that. Rogers, when we hit the beachheads, I want you to find a good vantage point, and I mean good. Call out their bunkers' blind spots and do not engage unless I give the order. That goes for the rest of you; nobody fires until I give the green light. We will not be able to complete this op undetected, but we have to stay under their radar for as long as possible. Owens, you're our point man. Allers, you watch my back."

Owens spoke up, "Sir, when do we leave?"

"I want all of you packed and ready to go in thirty. Be back at the CC by then."

"Yes, sir!" They left the CC one by one to prepare for the upcoming mission. After they had gone, I rested my hands on the table, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. Hold on, Eli. I'm coming.

The three fighters received handshakes, high fives, and congratulations all around as they moved through the berthing area to

pack their gear. The camp's arms master had given them free run of the armory and allowed them to take whatever they wanted, on account of the mission's importance. They carefully weighed their options, and eventually settled on three very unique weapons. I walked up and looked into the armory just as Rogers chose an L115A3 bolt-action sniper rifle. He screwed a muzzle brake onto the barrel and swapped out its standard scope for a dual-band infrared variant with higher magnification. He settled on a USP .45 for his sidearm, along with two smoke grenades.

"This will drop 'em quick," he said as he began cleaning the rifle's interior.

Owens eventually gravitated to an F2000 assault rifle. The scout declined to use the conventional 30-round magazines in favor of the lighter, easier to handle 20-round compact mags. He settled on a P250 chambered for .45 ACP with luminescent iron sights for his secondary weapon. He pocketed three frag grenades, two "9-Banger" flash grenades, and two concussion grenades.

"Move quick, kill quicker," he repeated his mantra to himself as he thumbed the last round into a magazine and stuffed it in one of his tactical vest's pockets.

Allers was inspecting an extremely rare weapon; I had only ever heard of it from the field reports Command fired my way. I had no idea what it actually looked like, but looking at the handheld monstrosity Allers was holding, I knew this had to be it. It was a shotgun, and a distressingly large one at that. Painted matte black with a golden Combine insignia on the stock and shaped roughly like a KSG 12, the weapon weighed in at seven kilos when it was empty. The shells it was chambered for were an Overwatch prototype. They were the same size as eight-gauge slugs, but that was where the similarities ended. The nose of the slug contains a microscopic sensor that goes off about five feet before the projectile reaches its target. When the signal is sent, the slug fragments into razor-sharp incendiary shards to cause maximum bleeding, irreparably damage tissue and organs, and potentially set hostiles aflame. Its tube could carry ten shells and saying the gun was bulky would be an understatement, but Overwatch had put zero effort into mobility when designing this monster. Overwatch had incorporated a complex recoil damping system to prevent the dislocation or shattering of the user's shoulder and collarbone. It still kicked like hell, though.

And some wonder why the Resistance had taken to calling it "The Eviscerator."

Something devilish shone in Allers' eyes as she slammed a magazine home, pumped the slide, and checked the sights.

"Oh yeah, baby," she said in a manner I couldn't describe.

She grabbed two handguns instead of one, and both were essentially hand cannons. Her first handgun was a Desert Eagle chambered for .50 Action Express hollow-point. Her second choice was a Taurus Judge 28-gauge buckshot revolver. She slid her Desert Eagle into a holster on her thigh, and the Taurus into one on the left side of her hip.

She once again turned to the weapon racks and reached for another

gadget of destruction. _She's not done?_ I made a mental note to never ask what she did before the invasion.

The weapon she chose was an M32 revolving grenade launcher with a rangefinder scope and shoulder sling. She snapped open the built-in magazine's receiver and inserted a 40mm HE grenade into each chamber before flicking it closed again. She lined her gear belt with ten more HE rounds.

Each of the three fighters were fitted with full-body Dragon Skin armor, including helmets and neck padding. Due to her unique choice of weaponry, Allers was given a specialized tactical variant of the armor. This type of Dragon Skin offered an extra layer of protection on the torso at the cost of several gear pockets. The armor's manufacturers compensated for the lack of gear space by using gear loops on the vest, forearms, and thighs. Allers filled the forty-something smaller loops with Eviscerator shells. There were five larger loops, ideal for flares and other such-sized gear. After some searching, she found five incendiary grenades and slipped them into the gear loops. She filled half of the vest's ten remaining pockets with seven-round .50AE hollow-point magazines for her Desert Eagle and the other half with 28-gauge buckshot shells for her Taurus Judge.

Before she put on her neck padding, I noticed she had a tattoo I had previously missed: the words "***CUT HERE**" and a dotted line across her throat.

Rogers and Owens briefly looked her way, started to turn back to what they were doing, and then froze. They slowly looked back her way with nervous anxiety.

Owens managed to speak, "Jesus Christ, Allers."

Rogers added, "What in the name of all things holy is _that_? Are you compensating for something?"

She grinned, "Yeah. Both of you." They all laughed.

The CO came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. "Sir?"

"Yes, Major?"

"We've been made. I don't know how, but they know we're coming. Nova Prospekt has just been put on Threat Level Red; silent infiltration will be impossible."

I grit my teeth. "Damn it. How could they know?"

"As I said, sir, I don't know."

"Then hypothesize, Major."

"Sir, my best guess would be that the alert was declared because of you."

"Elaborate."

"During and after the Battle of Black Mesa, Overwatch troops failed to kill you. Two hours ago, you were racing past their armored

patrols on Highway 17. It seems like Overwatch Command has finally realized how much of a threat you pose to them. And they figured out where you're going."

"I'm open to secondary plans, Major."

"Sir, there are none. I hate to say this, but I recommend canceling the op."

"No. If we turn back, Eli dies."

"Thenâ€¦ good luck." He turned and left.

A few minutes later, my team reported that they were ready. The three fighters shouldered their packs and followed me outside. We had barely exited the armory when we all noticed something amazing. The camp's fighters lined the sides of the street; Alpha platoon on our left and Bravo on our right. They were all in their dress uniforms, standing at parade rest. Looking down the long lines of men and women, we saw Major Grey flanked by a four-man honor guard team standing at attention. Rogers and Allers audibly gasped.

After a moment of hesitation, my team fell in beside me and we began ceremoniously marching down the street. When we reached Major Grey and the honor guard team, they saluted. All four of us returned the gesture without hesitation.

The major's voice boomed down the street as he gave orders.

"Honor Guard! Presentâ€¦ arms!" The four men and Major Grey saluted again and held the position.

"Ready!"

"Aim!" They shifted into a firing stance and aimed their M4 carbines into the air while Major Grey continued saluting.

"Fire!" The men squeezed their triggers, sending four rounds up into the night.

"Fire!" They shot another volley.

"Fire!" More bullets flew.

"Honor Guard! Orderâ€¦ arms!" The team returned their weapons to their chests as the major dropped his salute.

I asked the CO, "Major Grey? I have a few words for the company."

"By all means, Colonel."

I projected my voice outwards, "Fall out and gather on me!" The fifty men and women broke ranks and jogged to me, but kept a formal distance.

"Tomorrow is the twentieth anniversary of Invasion Day. Twenty years ago, an empire of tyranny rained fire from the skies and stained Earth's soil with the blood of six hundred million men, women, and children. For two decades we have lived under their iron boot, but no

more. Nobody knows where they came from. Hell, we don't even know what they want. All we know is their plans don't involve us. To them, we're just a race plagued by self-destruction; and they will not stop until they have completely eradicated the Resistance. But someone once said, 'the right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world.'

"I survived the Black Mesa Incident, and I have spent the twenty years since then fighting a seemingly unstoppable enemy. The enemy has proven how far they are willing to go when they launched a MAC strike on Black Mesa East and ended another four thousand Resistance lives in an instant. They believe their attack will go unanswered, but they are gravely mistaken. Every year, the anniversary of Invasion Day has been a day of mourning for the Resistance. That will not be the case this time. In the 1700s, British colonists in the Americas suffered constant oppression and cruelty from the British Parliament. When they rebelled in 1775, they started a war against the world's most powerful army. Despite all odds, the Americans were victorious; and they won their independence. Tonight, our assault on Nova Prospekt will light the fires of revolution once again!" the fighters were getting increasingly worked up, "The flames will spread from city to city, from Sector to Sector, and from continent to continent! No longer will we submit to their oppression! No longer will we submit to their neglect! No longer will we submit to their brutal inhumanity! They can take away your property, they can take away your rights, they can even take away your lifeâ€| but there is one thing they can never steal. They can never take your courage. No matter how much they kick and shove, no matter how much they rip and tear, we will persist. Tomorrow we rise up as brothers and sisters in arms! At oh-five-hundred we attack, and we take back our home!" Overwhelming cheers erupted from the fighters.

"For honor!" The cheering rose in volume.

"For justice!" The fighters grew louder still.

"For freedom!" The applause was deafening now; I could barely hear myself speak.

"For the Resistance!"

"FOR THE RESISTANCE!"

I turned in the general direction of City 17 while the cheering ran its course. _President Breen, I know you're listening. I don't know how or why you could betray your own race, but I do know one thing. One of us is going to die soon. You had better dig in and prayâ€| because I'm coming for you._

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Hope you enjoyed! I couldn't help noticing that I'm still the sole voter on my poll. :(Anyway, I have another question for my readers: do you prefer me posting longer chapters in multiple parts (around 3-3.5K words each), or just posting the whole thing in a big damn brick? On another note, I've been listening to a lot of Hollywood Undead recently, and yesterday I realized just how well some of their songs fit Uprising. I want to share one of their songs with you. It's called "Glory" and to me it projects the raw emotions the Resistance fighters hold in their hearts as they march

on City 17.

Cheers!

SergeantLawson

_Welcome, to the world you see;

>An AK with a couple magazines.
Whose blood it is don't matter to me;

>Scatter the ashes over seven seas!
That sickness, that feeling inside you;

>That's weakness, don't let it divide you;
Keep this, that feeling of pride too;

>Digging up bones, but you bury the truth!
Children... Hypocrisy,

>That's what I give, you can take it from me;
If you don't, you won't live to see;

>One last act of tragedy!
No mother's heart can make me humble;

>No life lost can make me stumble;
Our empire will never crumble!_

_We did it for the glory! The glory. Only the glory!

>We lived and died a story! It's our story! All for the glory!

_Bullets, begin to strip.

>_A man of reason, he's a man of sin__!__

>A man of treason and the ones who live;
They'll take what you got, what you got to give!

>Then up higher;
A trial by fire!

>They're liars;
Like funeral pyres!

>A letter to a mother from across the sea.
A son in a box, buried beneath!

>For whom the bell tolled, the tolls for thee;
For whom they smile when they put you to sleep!

>A deal with the devil is a deal with me;
And that deal is forever so long as you breathe!

>Go forth child, make us proud.
__Honor is yours, underground__!__

>Though we love you we lay you down!

_We did it for the glory! The glory. Only the glory!

>We lived and died a story! It's our story! All for the glory!

10. Nova Prospekt (Part 2)

Chapter 10: Nova Prospekt (Part 2)

****AUTHOR'S NOTE: ****Happy late-ass Halloween, ladies and gentlemen! Uprising has just reached ten whole followers (cue unenthusiastic yaaaay)! I carved a Combine Elite insignia into my pumpkin this year. I went out as an HECU recon trooper with a prop MP5K, and I felt like a total badass. The only downside was that I had some explaining to do when a cop spotted the gun, though. It wasâ€¦ an interesting experience. Anyway, let's move on to other news. More _Half-Life 3_ conspiracy theories are hitting the internet every day, and I enjoy reading them mainly for the ridiculously asinine source material. One

in particular caught my eye, though, and upon closer inspection I realized it wasn't a conspiracy theory at all: it was quite possibly the best idea I've heard since student council pushed for installing Coors Light in the water fountains last year. **_**MAKE A PROFESSIONAL MOD INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR VALVE TO PRODUCE HALF-LIFE 3!**_** Black Mesa infallibly proved the amazing things a group of ragtag friends can accomplish with a lot of love and effort. There's already a very decent mod for an Opposing Force sequel, called **_Opposing Force 2_**. I highly recommend checking it out. The community also did wonderful things with **_Nightmare House 2_**. With all this in mind, why the hell has nobody thought of making Half-Life 3 on their own? I'm perfectly fine with waiting a few years for a good mod to pop up. I would start on it myself, but I have next to no programming skill. To all my readers: you could be part of one of the most successful mods in PC gaming history. Get out there, gather up a few friends, build a team and start laying the groundwork. Publicize your project; bring people on board. I'm not crazy, and you know I'm not crazy. This could really happen, and it starts with you.

Anyway, this is probably the most action-packed chapter yet. Shit gets real and there are two, repeat, two massive plot twists within. On another note, I haven't received any reviews for a while, and nobody has shot me a single PM, period. I love this fic, and it means a lot to me that you guys and girls have stuck with me for this long, but reviews and PMs are what keep me going. They provide me with a bevy of great ideas and let me know what you want from Uprising. Your opinions and suggestions matter to me, and they can indeed make a difference.

Enjoy!

000

I was up against a rock wall with Allers right behind me. Owens was some fifty feet ahead of us, peering around the corner. Rogers was up high, scanning the terrain through his scope.

I pressed two fingers to my ear, activating my tight-beam comlink, "Raven Team, this is Raven One. Check in, over."

Owens' voice echoed into my ears, "Raven Two, checking in."

Rogers was hushed due to his concentration, "Raven Three, checking in."

Allers was just feet behind me, but she used her comlink for the rest of the team, "Raven Four, checking in."

I spoke again, "Two, this is One. SITREP, over."

"Affirmative, One. No hostile presence in sight. Repeat, negative hostiles. Over."

Rogers cut in, "This is Three. Belay that. There's a gun emplacement to the left of your FOV (Field of Vision). Four confirmed hostiles, one manning a fifty. Permission to engage?"

I gave my orders, "Negative, Three; do not engage. Two, scope it out. Engage at your discretion, over."

"Roger, One. Two out."

"One out."

He slithered his way along the rock face and disappeared from my sight. Twenty seconds later, a double-click came over our comlinks. All clear. Allers and I quickly moved up, staying low as we made a beeline for the neutralized gun emplacement. The four men who were manning the post were down with two headshots each.

Rogers came over the radio, "Team, this is Three. You've got an enemy patrol headed your way. Two hostiles fifty meters off your three o'clock, no other contacts in visual range. Permission to engage?"

"Permission granted, Three. Make it quick and quiet."

"Roger that."

He fired twice, and the soldiers fell.

Owens commented, "Nice shot, Three. At this rate we might be able toâ€"

The Overwatch AI's voice echoed off the cliffs. "Priority warning: Nova Prospekt perimeter breach. Exterior response teams: contain hostile incursion." Klaxons started blaring and flares were fired into the air.

Allers shouldered her weapon, "You were saying?"

The first response squad came around the corner just as we had taken cover. I was the first to strike, killing the point man with my AR2. Rogers put a hole in the second guy's head with his rifle just as Owens cut another two down with his F2000. Allers sent the last one flying with her Eviscerator.

"Rogers, get down here! We have to move, now!"

"Copy that, sir!" He joined us on the ground in less than a minute, his rifle slung across his back and his USP in his hands.

I shouted above the klaxons, "Listen up! My scanner's telling there's another gun emplacement just around the corner. I can move faster with my suit, so stay back and wait for my all-clear!"

Owens nodded, "Understood, sir; we'll wait here."

I pumped the slide on my SPAS-12 and ran. I kept to the rock face and dumped everything my suit had into hydraulics power. I made it past the fifty with only a few hits. As soon as I was behind the bunker, I shot my feet out and slid past the security team, killing one of them mid-motion. I used the last of my momentum to spin around and shotgun the other two. The last guy had come out of the bunker and was about to blow my head off. Reacting quickly, I rolled out of his way and shot him in the ankle. He cried out and fell down, allowing me to get up and gun him down.

"Clear," I uttered into my comlink, and my team appeared ten seconds later.

"Plan B, sir?" Allers asked.

"We go in fast and loud. Stay tight and keep your heads down. I need survivors, not heroes. Understood?"

"Five by five, sir."

I continued, "The main facility is fifty feet above us, so we're grappling up top. Rogers, Owens, you're on my left. Allers, to my right." I raised my arm and primed my suit's wrist-mounted grappling hook. "On my mark— mark!"

We fired our grappling hooks and they spiraled up into the darkness. The devices found purchase high above, and we made the climb.

000

Meanwhile, at the far end of the complex, Captain Alyx Vance had made her own infiltration. Her entrance strategy had been much quieter, but immeasurably more risky. She had hidden inside a weapons crate and hitched a ride on a munitions truck. The Combine had become arrogant and they were convinced infiltrating Nova Prospekt was impossible; and thus they had not searched the truck. It was a mistake for which they would pay most dearly.

She nudged the two soldiers with the tip of her boot, ensuring the guards were indeed dead before she moved on. Alyx peered both ways down the hall and spied a command room. She made a dash for it and came through unseen—or so she thought. There was another individual in the room with her, holding a tattered olive drab fleece coat.

"End of the line, Miss Vance." It was Commander Thatcher, the head of Vixen Squad. Her grey uniform was clean and pressed, her boots were shined, and not one strand of her jet black hair was out of place. She unceremoniously tossed the coat aside and turned to face her Resistance counterpart. _ That's my father's jacket._

Alyx balled her hands into fists and narrowed her eyes. "Where'd you get that?" she demanded with no small measure of .

Thatcher flashed an evil grin, "You _know_ where."

Alyx charged, connecting with a right hook and pinning Thatcher to the floor. She alternated fists, landing punch after punch until Thatcher jabbed her knee into Alyx's stomach and pushed her off. Thatcher wiped the thin trails of blood from her nose, and both women stood. Alyx rushed in again but Thatcher leaned sideways and dodged the punch. The specialist countered with a roundhouse kick to her opponent's stomach. Alyx bent over and coughed up a mouthful of blood.

"Enough playing around." She kicked Alyx in the throat.

000

The soldier patrolling the cliff tops didn't have time to scream before he was sent plummeting off the ledge.

"Guard is down."

Rogers held up a finger. "Waitâ€|" _Smack._ "Now he's down."

I sized up their exterior defenses, "Cut the chatter, people; we've got watch towers ahead. Rogers, you take the one on the left. I've got the one on the right."

"Affirmative, sir. Waiting for your mark." We leveled our crosshairs on the guards and held our breaths.

"Threeâ€| twoâ€| oneâ€| mark!" Two suppressed weapons coughed, and two lives were cut short.

"Clear right."

"Clear left." Negative contacts; I've got nothing on my trackers." I addressed our squad's pyromaniac directly, "Allers, why don't you say hello?"

"It would be my pleasure." She leveled her M32 grenade launcher against her shoulder and took aim at the building's wall.

"Knock, knock, motherfuâ€|" An explosion and gouts of flame drowned out the rest of her sentence. "Gentlemenâ€| we're in."

000

Thatcher darted around her opponent and tried to strike again, but Alyx had another trick up her sleeve. She back flipped into the air at the last second and delivered a bicycle kick into Thatcher's face. As soon as she landed, she spun to face her opponent. Thatcher ducked sideways, propped her hands onto the ground, and shot a foot out to sweep Alyx's legs. Her counterpart jumped and barely dodged the attack. Thatcher flipped herself over in midair and delivered a second sweep into her side. Alyx staggered from the kick and Thatcher stood again.

Thatcher showed a smile born of hatred, "You put up a better fight than your father did," she taunted, "He was begging for death, long before I was finished with him."

Alyx screamed in rage and slammed her fist into Thatcher's face. The phantom retaliated with a punch to her stomach and an elbow to her jaw. The Combine officer had learned enough about her opponent to know exactly how to beat her, and she didn't hesitate to press her advantage. Alyx swung again but Thatcher reached up and caught her fist. She tightened her grip and bent Alyx's wrist backwards. The Resistance fighter cried out in pain as she was forced to her knees.

"Freeman taught you well, but notâ€| wellâ€| enough." Thatcher connected with a right, knocking Alyx to the floor. "Your emotions are your weakness." She kicked Alyx in the ribs while she was down. "You've lost focus. I, howeverâ€|" Thatcher grabbed Alyx by the throat and lifted her into the air, "â€|am a professional." The commando gave Alyx a headbutt and threw her to the floor, "Like father, like daughter," she hissed as she began choking her, "And so ends the Vance family."

A gunshot rang out, drawing both women's attention.

The newcomer holstered his recently fired M9 and assessed the situation. He wore the mottled black and grey pattern of the U.S. Marine Corps HECU, Kevlar-VI body armor, and a red recon beret. The man's black hair was cut well within military regulations. He wore colonel's eagles on his collar. The nametape on his armor read "Shephard A." His dark blue eyes were alight with anger and determination.

"Let her go, Thatcher."

Shephard made his move the instant she had released Alyx. He planted a steel-toed boot in Thatcher's chest, sending her staggering backwards. The marine leaned down and offered a hand to the exhausted Resistance fighter. Alyx took it and shakily stood.

Keeping his eyes on Thatcher, he said, "Stand down, Captain. I'll take care of this."

"Shephard— she killed my father."

Shephard narrowed his eyes, "I understand."

Thatcher rushed in, aiming to strike first and catch Shephard off guard. It would be the worst mistake of her life. The marine stepped sideways and delivered a kick into the side of her knee. The Combine officer recovered instantly, using her previously uncontrolled momentum to whirl around and throw an elbow into Shephard's ear. He rolled his head with the strike, minimizing its impact. Shephard countered with a kick into Thatcher's left flank, a jab into her right armpit, and a knife hand strike to the left side of her neck. Thatcher tried to throw another right hook, but Shephard was ready. He grabbed her wrist, twisted her arm sideways, and drove a kick into her elbow. Vixen One uttered a very real cry of pain as the bones in her arm shattered and her limb bent the wrong way, leaving it all but dead at her side. Shephard didn't even give her a chance to retaliate. He took several steps back to gather momentum while Thatcher was still reeling, and then rushed back in, delivering an airborne kick into Thatcher's face. The commando flew backwards into the wall and fell to the deck. Shephard knew how dangerous she could be despite her condition; so he moved in slowly and cautiously, watching her every move. The marine drew his M9, cocked the hammer, and aimed at the back of Thatcher's head. She chose that moment to strike. Thatcher moved like a blur, disarmed her opponent with a crescent kick to his wrist, and stitched a line of jabs up his exposed flank. The pistol left his grip and spun off to the side. Neither officer made a rush for the pistol. Thatcher raised her fists, grit her teeth and glared menacingly at her counterpart. Her hair was disheveled and loose strands hung over her face. Her nose was broken, and her teeth shone with blood. Shephard glared right back; knowing Thatcher was losing and growing desperate. The commando charged, more out of desperation than anything else; but she was faltering, slow. Shephard put her on the ground with a punch to her stomach and a heel behind her knee.

Circling his opponent and keeping his guard up, Shephard spoke in a voice cold enough to put Admiral Frasier to shame, "Eli was a great man. Fifteen years ago, he stumbled upon me on the streets of City

17; abandoned, starving." Thatcher was trying to push herself off the ground, but Shephard kicked her arm out from underneath her, "He took me in, gave me a family. Eli taught me to stand for something greater than myself. He taught me to stand for honor. For justice. For the Resistance."

He ripped Thatcher off the floor and pulled her into a chokehold. The Combine officer thrashed violently and gnashed her teeth in a final desperate fight. Shephard jerked his arm upwards and sideways, snapping Thatcher's neck. The marine unceremoniously dropped her lifeless body to the floor, walked over to his discarded M9, holstered the weapon, and left without a look back.

000

"Move up!" shouted Allers after she had put down the three guards. We moved down the hallway in a dispersed crisscross formation. Suddenly, the lights went out. Flares were launched from the other end of the hall, and the devices bathed sections of the hall in a ruddy glow.

Rogers realized what we were up against, "Spec ops downrange; take cover!" We all dove into separate rooms and readied our weapons.

Each of the ten men was clad in black with crimson highlights on their helmets and shoulders. They were protected with Dragon Skin body armor, minus the neck padding. Unlike mainstream Overwatch infantry, their helmets did not offer full head protection, forgoing the extra armor in favor of situational awareness. They wore a variant of the STG combat visor, but this model was black and shaped like U.S. infantry sunglasses. The glasses gave off a faint pale blue glow around the edges due to the information that was projected onto the lenses. Their weapons, however, were far more worthy of attention. Six of them carried SCAR-16 assault rifles with ACOG scopes, foregrips, and tactical flashlights. Two of them were armed with Mossberg 590 shotguns equipped with laser sights. The last two held M240 Bravo light machine guns with EOTech 553 holographic sights.

One of the heavies stepped forward and started laying down suppressing fire, giving his buddies time to take up positions. I knew my shields couldn't stand up against that kind of firepower, so I tried something new. I stuck only my AR2 out, just a few inches above the ground. I blind-fired, swiftly rotating the gun back and forth to cover the entire width of the hallway. The rounds tore into his ankles and he crumpled to the floor.

I heard one of the troopers sound off, "Alpha-5 is wounded! Repeat, we've got wounded!"

Just seconds after the heavy went down, Allers saw an opportunity and took it. She pulled out her Desert Eagle, aimed at the soldier dragging his comrade to the sidelines, and fired three times. The .50AE hollow-point rounds mushroomed on impact and gored him. Allers immediately switched to her M32 grenade launcher and fired an HE charge down the hallway. The blast killed two more soldiers.

"Bravo-1 and Bravo-2 are down! Alpha-3 is critical!"

Another trooper yelled, "Fire in the hole; back blast area clear!"

I looked down the hall to see the trooper drop to one knee and shoulder a Mk 158 SMAW missile launcher.

"Firing!" I was about to leap out and take the rocket for her, but Rogers jumped out before I could. The rocket hit him straight in the chest and engulfed him in a ball of flame, and the shockwave still threw Allers back. Owens and I shouted in rage and charged them, with Allers close behind. We collectively blew the shit out of the man who had just killed Rogers, and proceeded to paint the walls with the other Combine infantrymen.

"Clear," I uttered with heavy solemnity. We turned back to Rogers, but what was left was unrecognizable. Allers dropped to her knees and picked up his helmet. She turned the burn-scarred helmet over in her hands and looked at its right side. Rogers had drawn his signature emblem here; a flaming pair of crosshairs with a Lambda in the middle.

Allers brushed her thumb across the emblem and shook her head, "Damn it, Nelson."

I knelt down beside her, "I don't know if this helps, but Rogers was a good soldier. He was eager to volunteer for this mission, despite the risks. He gave his life without hesitation to save yours. I don't like soldiers dying under my command, but I always remember every single one who does, both in my mind, and in my heart. I will see to it that he receives a proper service once the mission is complete, and I am going to lead the honor guard team myself. For now, though, we have to push on. You have to push on. Nelson would want that."

Allers slowly took a deep breath. After a few seconds, she nodded and stood.

A shotgun's report echoed nearby, and a Combine soldier flipped backwards into the hallway. We all turned and brought our weapons to bear, prepared for another assault. I couldn't believe who came around the corner.

I stowed my AR2. "Alyx?"

"Surprised? I couldn't let you have all the fun."

"Who's the other guy?"

Her companion answered, "Colonel Shephard, HECU."

I pulled my .357 off of my thigh and zeroed in on him. "Gun on the floor. Hands in the air."

Alyx and my squad looked back and forth between us, unsure of what was happening. "What?"

"Back up, Alyx."

"Gordon, what the hell is going on?"

"Back. Up." I readdressed Shephard, "Keep your hands in the air!"

Shephard locked his eyes with mine, "Freeman, if you point a gun at someone you had better be ready to pull the trigger."

"April 15th, 2015. Operation Black Mesa. What was the point?"

"To contain an extraterrestrial threat."

"By indiscriminately exterminating everything and detonating a nuclear bomb?"

"We were following orders! My men and I didn't know what we were really doing!"

"You didn't know what you were doing?" I shook my head in disbelief, "You were killing _civilians_, you son of a bitch!"

"Damn it, Freeman, this isn't the time!"

I cocked my revolver's hammer. "I should shoot you right nowâ€¦ but you're lucky." I lowered my gun.

"Look, I won't try to make excuses for the past or rationalize what I've done, and I'm probably going to burn after I die. For now, though, I'm going to do whatever I can to make things right. And after all of this is over, you can shoot me. I can't live with myself anyway, not after seeing the blood on my hands."

I simply nodded.

Alyx spoke up, "Come on, Gordon. We need to keep moving."

That was when I noticed how beaten up she was. "What happened to you?"

"Thatcher."

"Thatcher's here?"

"She's dead. Shephard killed her."

I turned to the HECU officer. "Well done," I said with real sincerity. Suddenly we heard noises coming from deeper inside the base. First there was shouting, and then there was gunfire. An explosion went off just a few seconds later.

Owens shouldered his F2000 once again, "What the hell was that?"

Shephard grinned, "That?" He cocked his head in the direction of the commotion, "That would be around two thousand _really_ pissed off United States Marines unleashing hell and high water on our hosts."

"You set them loose?"

"No. That was Miss Vance over here. I risked my life heroically covering her while she hacked into their system."

Alyx rolled her eyes, "I hit a _button_, Shephard."

Shephard held up a hand, "Quiet down." He keyed his radio, "This is Colonel Shephard. All units report status. I say again, all units report status. Over."

"_Alpha Company reporting in. Cell Block One secure. Over."_

"_Bravo Company reporting in. Cell Blocks Two and Three secure. Over."_

"_Charlie Company, reporting. Cell Block Four secure. Over."_

"_Delta Company, checking in. Beachheads secure and all bunkers locked down. Over."_

"_Echo Company, reporting in. We are unable to reach the hangar bays at this time. Foxtrot Company is engaging hostile targets ahead and we have standing orders to hold position until clear. Over."_

Ten seconds passed and nothing more came over the radio. Shephard pressed two fingers to his ear. "Foxtrot Company, report status."

Static.

"I say again, Foxtrot Company, report status."

Silence.

"Foxtrot Company, check in."

Still nothing.

"Foxtrot, do you copy?"

The man who finally answered was panicked and had to shout over the heavy gunfire and deafening explosions all around him. "_Thisâ€¦ -oxtrot... pinned downâ€¦ casualtiesâ€¦ -ay again, heavy casualt-â€¦_"

"Negative copy; say again your last. Over."

"_This is Foxtrot! We're pinned down at the airfield! Our Company Commander is dead and we're taking heavy casualties! Requesting support!"_ A wet smack came across the com and the trooper screamed in pain. A second voice came in, barely audible above the chaos of battle, "_Halsey's down; get a medic!"_ Contact with the troops was abruptly cut off. I could see the gears turning in the HECU commander's head; his men's lives were on the line.

"Echo Company, can you reach Foxtrot's location?"

"_Negative, sir; not on a direct approach. We'll look for an alternate route. How copy? Over."_

"Solid copy, Echo. Give 'em hell. Shephard out."

Alyx walked over to a security monitor. "I can patch into the security cameras to give us a better view. Give me a sec."

The display hummed to life a moment later. Alyx began cycling through the cameras. Most of them showed HECU-occupied hallways and rooms. Some displayed bodies from both sides with the marines carrying their dead and wounded off the battlefield, and executing surviving Combine soldiers. One display caught my eye, but Alyx moved past it before I could get a good look.

I lead in next to her, "Wait, go back." She browsed through the security monitors in the opposite direction as I guided her on, "Moreâ€| moreâ€| moreâ€| right there! Stop!"

The camera's watchful eye showed only a com room, but its sole occupant was the point of interest.

Alyx squinted at the video feed, trying to identify the person in view. "Is that Dr. Mossman?"

I nodded, "Yes, it is." Dr. Mossman was one of the Resistance's top scientists and one of its founders. There were three things very wrong with this picture. First, the fact that she was not in a cell or being escorted by HECU troops. Second, the leisurely way she paced around in the room suggested she was too much at ease for being held in a Combine prison, not to mention Nova Prospekt. Third and most disturbing, she was talking with President Breen.

"_You promised! You promised you wouldn't hurt Eli!"_

Breen's unwaveringly calm voice floated back, "_The soldiers were a bitâ€| overzealous, I admit, but we simply couldn't pass up a prize as valuable as him."_

Mossman's voice was rising in anger, "_Prize? Valuable? He's dead! One of your spooks tortured him to death!"_

A hint of warning entered Breen's speech, "_Now, Judith, do not forget the position you are in. Remember, you have failed to provide us with Dr. Freeman."_

"_You would've had Freeman if you had been patient and waited for my signal!"_

"_You must view this from my perspective. I had not received word from you in weeks. Your feelings for Eli made me begin to doubt your loyalties."_

"_Feelings?"_ she shot back, suddenly defensive, "_This has nothing to do with feelings! Iâ€|""_

His tone turned dismissive, "_So sorry, Judith; but I'm all out of time. Return to the Citadel immediately. General Mikhailovich will debrief you."_ Breen cut the link. Mossman exhaled and rested her head in her hands.

Alyx slammed her fist down on the console. "Damn her! I don't believe this!"

"Where was that?" Shephard asked.

Alyx answered, "Halfway across the base, right next to the teleporter room."

"I'm sending a team, but don't expect her to stick around. It will be a miracle if they catch her." He relayed a set of orders through his radio, and two squads began making their way to Mossman's location.

"I have to get to the airfield and assist my men."

"We're coming with you," I replied as I picked up a SCAR-16 rifle from one of the dead Combine special ops men and began pocketing ammunition.

He made no objection. "Let's go, then."

000

We killed a few Combine soldiers here and there without any major encounters before we made it to the HECU's makeshift command post. A group of majors and captains leaned over a blueprint of the airfield, using it as a map. They tossed ideas and suggestions around, but all were deemed impossible.

"Does Foxtrot have any rockets left?"

"Negative, they spent the last of their heavy ordnance on the enemy vehicles."

"Can we get any resupply to them?"

"We've tried twice already. Our men can't survive the run across open ground. However, Echo Company's recent arrival has opened up more options. Their CC reported he sent a heavy team up to the rooftops, and they should be in position now."

"What kind of vehicles are we looking at here?"

"Four IFVs (Infantry Fighting Vehicles) in the latest wave."

"What about ours?"

"None, yet. All of our vehicles, armor, and air power are locked down in the hangar bays."

"What kinds of assets are being held here, exactly?"

"Everything. M2 Bradley IFVs, M1A2 Abrams tanks, Comanche attack helicopters, F15 Eagles and F22 Raptors, A10 Warthog attack planes, AC130 gunshipsâ€¦ Sir, if we push the enemy off this point, we will have enough firepower to take City 17 inside of two weeks, and with half as many casualties."

His companion nodded, "Then we had betterâ€¦ holy Mary."

Every head in the room turned our way. I could only imagine what was going through their heads. Colonel Shephard, flanked by Gordon Freeman and a civilian, followed by a battered man and woman in full-body Dragon Skin armor, the latter armed with a distressingly

large eight-gauge shotgun, two heavy pistols and a grenade launcher.

"Gentlemen," Shephard acknowledged them as he lit a cigarette.

His radio chirped, _"This is Lieutenant Fergus, Foxtrot Company! We've broken through! Hostiles have suffered excessive casualties and are falling back! I say again, remaining tangeros are retreating! They're running for the hills and we have taken the airfield! The airfield is ours!"_

"Excellent job, Lieutenant! First round's on me tonight."

"_Looking forward to it, sir! Fergus out."_

We walked right by the room's occupants as if nothing was out of the ordinary, and stepped out into the cool night air. The sky was black with storm clouds and a light, constant rain gave the atmosphere an almost misty quality. The airfield itself looked like a warzone. Scores of bodies from both sides were littered and strewn about. Burning wrecks and smoldering husks of a dozen varied Combine vehicles dotted the landscape. A squad was busy with damage control, dousing the flames on a destroyed enemy APC. Engineers browsed the hundreds of confiscated HECU assets, ensuring everything was in working order. Three more squads were on high alert, scanning the perimeter for any sign of a counterattack.

There were two unoccupied Combine tanks parked directly to our left and right. Behind the pair of tanks on our left were three lines of fifteen cots, all filled with wounded HECU troopers. A team of eight medics tended to their needs, three of them fervently working to reverse a dying corporal's cardiac arrest. The battle of weapons was over, but their fight raged on as they tried to save as many lives as possible.

Shephard broke off from our group and headed for the triage center. He slowly made his way to Halsey, the soldier from Foxtrot who had answered his call. The soldier's BDU blouse and undershirt were gone. A large white bandage covered half of his stomach and his left side, and his shoulder had been field dressed with gauze. His eyes and left ear were wrapped in bandages. Shephard knelt down at the man's right side and pulled two things out of his pocket: a Purple Heart ribbon and a silver star. He pinned both of these to the edge of Halsey's cot and bent down to whisper into his ear. We couldn't discern what he was saying, but it didn't matter. The gesture still held just as much meaning. When he was done speaking to Halsey, Shephard stood, told a nearby medic to take care of him, and rejoined us. We began walking across the airfield, towards the hangar bays.

The first hangar was occupied by eight rows of ten Humvees with .50 caliber roof-mounted guns. "Captain Dowski, how are my luxury vehicles doing?"

The engineer killed his blowtorch and lifted his visor, "Half are combat-ready now, sir. The rest just need fuel and ammunition."

Shephard nodded, "Glad to hear it. Carry on."

We moved from hangar to hangar, Shephard checking in with the

engineers in charge. As I saw more and more of the HECU arsenal, the possibility of taking City 17 and cutting the head off of the Combine command structure seemed more and more likely. While Shephard was inspecting his armory, I was pondering a daring operation. The HECU's ground and air forces, combined with the multitude of technologically superior enemy jets we had seized from Nova Prospekt's airfields, presented the opportunity for a two-pronged attack on City 17 and the _Razor's Kiss_.

"Shephard?"

"Yes?"

"I think I just figured out how to win this war." I voiced my plan, blow by blow.

The HECU commander thoughtfully rubbed his chin, "Yeah," he nodded to himself as he gave it more and more thought, "Yeah, that just might be our best shot at this. It's simple, but it sure won't be easyâ€¦" Shephard paused for a moment before coming to his decision; "We'll be ready whenever you are."

"Tomorrow, bright and early at 0500. We can't give the enemy a chance to organize a counter-attack."

"Agreed. Operation: Citadel launches in six hours."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Commander Thatcher is dead. Shephard is a badass. The HECU are free and have allied with the Resistance. Overwatch has suffered a serious blow and lost one of its two key facilities in Sector 17. And I killed off Eli! Mwahahahaha! I can't imagine the heat I'm going to take for this, but I guess that's life. A side note: I know Shephard is actually a corporal. I made him a colonel for three reasons: everyone calls him "sir" in Opposing Force, the HECU troopers he meets throughout the game instantly follow his orders without question, and I needed a vanilla character to be the HECU's commanding officer. As for the future, I don't know what I'm going to put in Anticitizen One and what I'm going to put in Follow Freeman. However, I do know I will be rocking several different POV's and there will be good stories to tell, both short and long, for them all. I have absolutely no clue when the next part will be posted, so hang tight!

Cheers!

SergeantLawson

11. Anticitizen One

11

Chapter 11: Anticitizen One

****AUTHOR'S NOTE: ****Merry Christmas! If this offends you, then happy holidays! I know it's been a good couple of months (I think, anyway) since I last updated _Uprising_, but here's chapter nine, andâ€¦ IT'S CHRISTMAS, MOTHERF**KER! I'm playing Hollywood Undead on shuffle, I

got enough cash to get my double-screen gaming PC, and I've played enough GTA V today to call my mental stability into question. Alleluia, holy shit! Ah, where's the Tylenol?!

****SergeantLawson will return momentarily****

000

The Razor's Kiss was holding position above City 17, providing extra security in light of the recent attack on Nova Prospekt. Its regular complement of one hundred armed troops had been tripled. The vessel's hangar bays, normally a lightly staffed area, were now on overdrive. Squadron after squadron of various aircraft lined the sides of the hangar and the deck was alive with activity. In the CIC, the bridge crewmembers were under the watchful eye of Captain Gomez, and they went about their tasks with a collective air of efficiency.

A junior lieutenant in the portside crew pit was monitoring the ship's radar screen, where planes and helicopters patrolled to and fro. One specific squadron, however, caught her eye. The eight-plane formation had just entered radar range and was not following any patrol pattern. In fact, they were not supposed to be in this sector at all. Suspicious, the lieutenant JG magnified the display to their position and ran a data scan.

FETCHING DATAâ€|

DATA RETRIEVAL FAILED

CAUSE: TARGET IFF SYSTEM(S) DISABLED

/end_report/

She turned to the ensign next to her. "Norman, I have an unidentified squadron on screen and their IFF (Identification Friend/Foe) tags are disabled. Take a look and try to raise them."

"Aye, aye." The ensign leaned over to observe the radar screen and mentally noted their positions before sitting back down. He then put on his headset, adjusted the mic, and thumbed the button for the general air channel.

000

The HECU pilots behind the controls of the eight Combine fighter jets had remained calm through their flight so far, but the Razor's Kiss and the dozens of enemy aircraft made the tension start to surface.

One of the fighter jockeys marveled at the Overwatch flagship, "Good God. Look at the size of that ship!"

"This isn't going to work," another pilot said nervously as he tightened his grip on the controls.

A third replied, "Cut the chatter, Kowalski."

He still persisted, "They're going to sniff us out."

"Kowalski! I said, shut _up_."

A double chirp came across the com. The squadron leader spoke up, "Alright, ladies, we're being hailed. You know what to do."

"Attention unidentified squadron. This is the Razor's Kiss. Identify yourself."

The pilots let them eat static.

"Unidentified squadron on bearing three-two-zero. Identify yourself."

Nobody replied.

"Unknown squadron, identify."

They gave no answer.

"I say again, identify immediately."

000

The ensign removed his headset and shook his head. "Negative response."

His counterpart nodded and swiveled in her chair to address the ship's XO. "Captain?"

Gomez pivoted in their direction and strode over. "Yes?"

"Sir, we have a problem."

"On my datapad," he ordered.

The LT punched in a few commands and swiped her finger across the screen, sending the info to Gomez's personal datapad. Gomez carefully tracked his eyes across his datapad, inspecting the junior officer's report. Sensing a larger issue than what was presently known, the XO took action.

"Get me Admiral Frasier."

Karen Frasier. Overwatch Fleet Admiral and Chief of Naval Operations. The Resistance called her many things. Murderer. Traitor. The list went on and on, but she preferred "The Ice Queen." It made no true implications of evil, only firm discipline. She was in her quarters, lying on her back and staring blankly at the ceiling. This was the first opportunity she'd had to rest in the past twenty hours, and she couldn't even sleep. She shifted over onto her side and saw a framed photograph on her nightstand. She picked it up, bringing it closer. The man who smiled back at her wore a U.S. Marine Corps dress uniform, his dark blue eyes reflecting the light. _Adrian_ Her intercom beeped, tearing her away from whatever emotions she may have been feeling. Reluctantly, she hit the button.

Her XO's disembodied voice floated out of the speaker, "Admiral?"

Frasier sighed in annoyance. "Captain, I made it clear I was not to be disturbed."

"A squadron just entered radar range. They're not supposed to be in this sector."

"And why does this concern me?" the admiral replied stonily.

Gomez realized how mundane his last statement was and hurried to recover. "The pilots are passing our patrols and maintaining radio silence."

"Again, why?"

Captain Gomez took a risk and cut his superior off, "They are flying in tightened tactical formation, and their bearing is consistent with an attack vector on our portside hangar bays."

After a brief pause, she replied, "I'm on my way." The admiral rolled out of her bunk, took a lint roller to her dress uniform, and left her quarters.

"SITREP, Captain," Frasier ordered as she approached Gomez from behind.

"Still no contact, ma'am; but their bearing has remained constant."

"Are they from the Razor's Kiss?"

"Negative."

"Has General Roland sent us reinforcements?"

"Negative."

"Display one of the fighters on-screen." One of the aircraft fizzled onto the viewscreen.

"Magnify," she ordered, her trained eyes searching over the fighter.

"Admiral?" Gomez inquired, curious of his superior's thoughts.

Frasier's eyes popped wide as she made a connection, "The markings!"

"What of them?"

"Look closely. What do you see?"

"Nova Prospekt," the captain said matter-of-factly, "But—" He trailed off as realization dawned on him, "That's not possible."

"Open a channel," she commanded.

"Ma'am?"

She turned and locked her eyes with Gomez. "Two-way audio to my com, _Captain_. Now." Gomez took a half step back and gave a slight nod.

"Lieutenant, open a two-way audio link; from the unidentified squadron to the CO."

"Aye, sirâ€| Link is open and stable."

000

One of the pilots glanced at the fighter's control panel. "They haven't called in a whileâ€|"

The squadron leader craned his neck around, taking in the dozens of enemy air patrols. "That's exactly why I'm worried."

Kowalski gulped, "Sir? We're being hailed again."

"Damn. What's the status on our reinforcements?"

"Most of our fighters are about three minutes from the AO (Area of Operations). The bombers and escorts are two minutes behind them."

"Okay, we're going in loud. Remember the plan, people. Two and Three, with me on the portside hangar. The rest of you, shoot down as many bandits as possible. Our job is to punch a hole for the air fleet."

"Unidentified squadron, this is Fleet Admiral Frasier, Overwatch NAVCOM."

Someone whispered, "Oh. Shit."

"You have entered high security airspace. Break off of your vector immediately."

The squadron remained silent.

"Disengage from your vector and exit this zone on bearing one-five-five. Repeat, break off or you will be marked as hostile."

The squadron leader addressed his men. "Break formation! Engage!" The three lead aircraft lanced forward at Mach 2 as the pilots hit the afterburners, while the other five split off in random directions to engage the Overwatch fighters. They knew they had no chance, but they still tried to buy their comrades time to reach the hangar. Two Overwatch patrols moved to intercept the HECU pilots, and they were soon on top of each other. Tracers and missile contrails sliced jagged shapes into the skyline as the airmen clashed.

000

Frasier's practiced impassivity was ebbing away. "Captain, who is flying those planes?"

An explosion from inside the ship challenged the officers' footing. "Damage report!" Gomez ordered.

An ensign in the starboard crew pit was dumfounded at the data on his screen. "Holy hell," he whispered.

The captain turned, "What was that, Ensign?"

"Sir, theyâ€¦ they just made a _suicide run_ into the portside hangar."

"Casualties?"

"No survivors in the portside or starboard hangars. The hangars themselves have been effectively destroyed. All airborne forces will be unable to dock for repairs and rearmament."

The lieutenant JG who had first reported the HECU squadron spoke up again, "Admiral! Additional contacts in radar range! They're coming right at us!"

"On screen," ordered Frasier. A portside perspective occupied the bridge viewscreens, where countless HECU aircraft came into view. Hundreds of F15 Eagles and F22 Raptors held their course towards the _Razor's Kiss_, with dozens of hulking AC130 gunships in their wake.

Captain Gomez took a tentative step forward. "Mother of God."

000

At the same time, a force of fifty Osprey troop transports broke away from the air fleet with an escort of Viper and Comanche attack helicopters. The detachment flew low, just above the rooftops of City 17, strafing left and right to avoid anti-aircraft fire. I was in one of the Ospreys heading for the plaza to set up a rally point. Allers was on my left, and Owens was on my right. Twelve HECU troopers kept us company in the cabin: there were two engineers, a medic, three recon troops, and six standard infantry. A second Osprey flew off our left flank, and three Viper gunships ran escort duty around us.

One of the grunts on the opposite side of the cabin nudged his buddy. "You ready?"

"Hell yeah. It's payback time." He slammed a magazine into his M4 and jacked the slide.

Another marine spoke up, "What's the game plan, sir?"

I replied, "We're being dropped into the plaza. Our first objective is to establish a perimeter and hold down a rally point."

The Osprey began decelerating and the pilot's voice came through the speakers. "We are five to dirt. Five to dirt."

Everyone on board was suddenly thrown off their feet as a hole was ripped into the cabin and the transport's left wing caught fire.

"This is Lightning One-One in the blind! We're hit! We're hit!"

Another missile blew a hole in the opposite side of the ship and killed three of the marines instantly. A fourth man, one of the engineers, fell backwards through the hole and plummeted a hundred feet. The transport began spinning to the right and smashed into a building before hitting the ground with a brutal nose-first impact. The Osprey tipped over and came to rest belly-up.

Distant gunfire and explosions were the first things I heard. I grit my teeth as I pushed the dead marine off my chest.

"Anyone else alive?" I called.

"Yeah, I'm here." _Owens._

"Still kicking." _Allers._

"I'm good." _Medic._

"Switched on." _Recon._

"Alive and pissed." _Recon._

"Okay. We need to move, now. The building to our right; the one we smashed into on the way down, should offer us some cover."

"Roger that."

"Stack up on me." Everyone lined up and crouched down. "Let's go!"

We sprinted out of the portside hole and made for the building. Enemy snipers on the rooftops and infantry on the ground fired at us as we dashed across the street. Most of their shots missed on account, but one of the snipers hit me in the back. We reached the lobby in seconds and fanned out. Coming in, I could see the front desk to our left. The middle of the lobby was completely open. Chairs and tables were arranged to the right. Allers, the medic, and myself dove behind the front desk. The two recon troopers and Owens spread out and took up positions behind chairs and tables. We started scanning our zones when a warning message appeared on my HUD: "Shield Failure." _The generator took a hitâ€¦ I've got no shields._ I wasn't the only one with problems, though, and someone else's troubles were much worse.

Allers whispered, "Son of a bitchâ€¦" Looking over, I saw her hands clamped on her right side. Blood seeped between her interlocked fingers.

I called out, "Allers is hit! She's hit!"

The medic dropped down next to her, pushed his glasses up on his nose and opened his kit. "Just keep pressure on it," he said calmly. His eyes betrayed the reality: _it's bad._ The corpsman was doing his best to stabilize her, but it was an uphill battle. She was losing blood too fast.

I took her hand, more out of instinct than anything else, "Stay with me, Allers. Come on!"

She grunted and turned her head towards me. "Sorry, Doc," the fighter said with some effort, "Damn stormtrooper got a lucky hit." I chuckled at what was probably her last snide jab.

"You always were a comedian, Allers."

She spoke again after several long seconds, "Doc?"

"Yeah?"

"Justâ€¦ finish the job for me."

"_You_ have to stay alive," I said with resolve, "I can't do it alone."

"I'm bleeding out, Doc. Owens is a good kid."

"True, but he's not you."

After a pause, she asked, "Could you get my knife?"

I pulled her 5-inch Ka-Bar out of its sheath and handed it to her. Allers took the knife, laid her Eviscerator across her lap, and started carving something into the butt. When she was done, she held it out to me. She had etched the words _NEVER GONE_ into the stock.

"I want you to have it." She grunted again and grit her teeth in pain.

I saw the light start to fade from her eyes. "Allers, don't die on me! Keep fighting!" There was nothing either the medic or I could do. Just a few seconds later, the fighter let out her last breath and her eyes glazed over. Her head rolled to the side, and I saw her lifeless eyes staring back at me. It was then that I wondered what I had truly become. I had been the top of my class at MIT, only to pick up a rifle and go to war. A scientist, turned into a killer. Once a physicist, now a soldier. I had killed hundreds, but I had failed to save even one life.

The medic shook his head. "She's gone. I'm sorry."

"Don't blame yourself. You did the best you could."

One of the other marines yelled, "Contact front! Contact front!"

000

A hundred miles away, Colonel Shephard and forty elite marines geared up outside of Nova Prospekt's teleporter room. Their mission was simple: board the _Razor's Kiss_ from the inside and bring it down. Shephard was listening to his radio, keeping tabs on the aerial battle for the best possible moment to strike.

"This is Tango 5-11, I've got two on my tail! I can't shake them!"

"Papa Gulf One is commencing bomb run. Ten seconds to drop."

"Viper 3-3 to Viper 3-7, watch your vectors. It's getting tight in here."

"Papa Gulf One to all units! Their shields are still up, break off all attack runs on the _Razor's Kiss_!"

"Tango 5-11, going down! Ejecting!"

"Romeo 4-2, I've got missiles tracking me!"

"Jesus Christ, they're everywhere!"

"Stay tight on those C130's; don't let anyone get a bead on them."

"This is Lightning One-One in the blind! We're hit! We're hit!"

That's Freeman's Osprey. His pilots were taking losses, and the enemy was shooting down his transports. They could wait no longer.

"Assault team, go! Assault team, go!"

000

Aboard the _Razor's Kiss_, Captain Gomez was trying in vain to convince his CO to send for reinforcements.

"Admiral, I strongly recommend we call in Airwatch."

"Our pilots are more than capable of holding their own."

"Ma'am, we are operating in the dark. We have no idea how many more bogeys the Resistance will send."

"That is exactly why I am not sending for reinforcements."

Gomez furrowed his brow. "I don't understand."

"They are Resistance pilots, and thus undertrained. They by no means possess military-level skill."

"Admiral, they don't fly like civilians."

Frasier's tone grew dark. "Are you suddenly an aeronautics expert, Captain?"

Her XO took a step backward. "No, ma'am, I was onlyâ€"

"Good, then."

One of the men in the starboard pit looked up. "Admiral? Priority transmission from Deck 6."

"Put it through." Frasier turned to the forward viewscreens.

A man's panicked face filled the monitor. Crewmen were shouting and running in the background. "Bridge, this is Deck 6!"

Frasier's reply was unfittingly calm, "CIC, receiving. Go ahead."

"This is Ensign Adams! We're being boarded!"

The admiral's passive demeanor gave way to a sharp tone. "What? How?!"

"We don't know! Theyâ€" oh, shit!" The junior officer ducked out of view and there was a burst of gunfire.

"Ensign, report!" Frasier yelled, "Ensign!"

Adams managed to pull himself back up in front of the camera. He'd taken two in the stomach and one to the lungs, and blood leaked from the corner of his mouth as he spoke.

"Admiralâ€" it'sâ€" it's theâ€" HECUâ€" A round went through his head and he slumped over the keyboard. Behind him was a marine with a gas mask and an assault rifle.

"_Clear,"_ he said before he gave his unseen squadmates a wave.

"Cut the link," ordered Frasier.

"Aye, aye," replied the LT. The picture gave way to an exterior view of the fast-paced air battle.

"Captain, how far have they spread?"

Gomez turned to his datapad and replied with his gaze still locked on the device, "From the sensor feeds I'm receiving, they are staying away from Decks 7 and below. It seems that they aim to carve a direct path to the CIC. For what purpose, I am uncertain."

"Their intent is simple: to neutralize the vessel's command staff. And _that_, Captain, we can agree must not happen." The admiral tapped a button on her own datapad, and a wall panel slid upwards at the aft end of the CIC. Inside the compartment were two XM8 assault rifles, each with three magazines.

The CO inserted one of the magazines into her weapon, flicked the safety off, and jacked the slide. "Put the ship on Threat Level Red. I want QRAT up here, now."

000

"Contact front! Contact front!" The recon troopers opened fire with their MP5 submachine guns and the medic ducked behind cover. I shouldered my SCAR-16 and joined in the fight. One of the enemy soldiers scored a hit on me, reminding me that my shields were now gone. We got a short break after we had put down the first squad, but it was only a few seconds before more of them appeared.

"Target, 20 meters!"

"Roger, tracking!" The trooper's MP5 barked, and the enemy went down.

A third enemy squad appeared and started shooting. A spray of lead

splintered the wooden tabletop next to Owens. "Damn, that was too close!"

The medic had started shooting at this point, more from necessity than anything else. His added fire helped keep the Overwatch troops at bay, but they were still growing closer. One of the Combine soldiers tossed a grenade into the room, and it came to rest next to one of the recon rangers.

"LOOSE FRAG!" The trooper didn't have time to move before the grenade went off.

"Man down!"

I keyed my suit's transmitter. "This is Colonel Freeman to any available aircraft, over."

After a good long moment, a pilot answered, "This is Venom 5-5, receiving loud and clear. Send your traffic, over."

"My bird is down and my team is holed up in a building. Overwatch armor is swarming our position. Requesting immediate support, over."

"Roger. What are your coordinates? Over."

"Unknown. Our bird crashed just west of the plaza. How copy? Over."

"Good copy. Venom 5-5 is inbound, ETA one minute. Venom 5-5, out."

"Freeman out."

I turned and shouted to the marines. "Air support is inbound!"

"Roger that; we'll hold the line!"

"Incoming armor, ten o'clock!"

A CPIF armored car rolled in from our left and swung its .50-caliber machine gun towards us. The weapon sounded off with low, deep thuds as it raked death across our positions.

The medic barely avoided a burst of infantry fire. "Holy shit!"

Our situation was grim, and there was only a featureless hallway to fall back to. When I stood to fire again, I noticed one of the Overwatch troops was looking skyward.

"Venom 5-5 is on target. Danger close."

"Get down!"

A pair of rockets left the Comanche's wing pods and blew the armored car to pieces. Twisted steel flew upwards and Combine soldiers were thrown in every direction. A flaming tire bounced carelessly down the street as the helicopter's door gunners mowed down the surviving infantry, and then the rooftop snipers.

"Ground team, be advised, hostiles neutralized. No remaining tangos sighted within immediate area. Repeat, immediate hostile presence eliminated. Over."

"Good copy, Venom 5-5. We appreciate the assist."

"You can thank me later. Venom 5-5, out."

"Colonel Freeman out."

Owens and the surviving recon specialist jogged to me. "What's the plan, sir?"

"We make for the plaza and dig in. If we can hold out until reinforcements arrive, we can establish a springboard for attacks deeper into the city."

"Sounds good. Let's roll."

000

The Combine technician yelled into the wall-mounted transmitter, "I need QRAT to Deck 5, Code Red! Repeat, Code Red!" An HECU trooper put two rounds into his head and he dropped.

Shephard yelled into his radio, "All units listen up! The enemy knows we're inside; be ready for anything! Alpha and Bravo, on me! Charlie, Delta, and Echo, you're on Engineering! Foxtrot and Golf, take out their comms! Let's go, people; move it!"

Alpha Squad's leader, just behind Shephard, asked, "Sir? Where are we going?"

"We're heading straight for the bridge. I need to say hello to someone."

000

Distant machine guns drummed out a steady beat of chaos as my team and I moved forward. The recon marine, who had introduced himself as Corporal Palmer, was on point. I was a few feet behind him, and the medic was between Owens and myself.

I shifted my SCAR-16's stock against my shoulder. "Eyes up. The plaza's just ahead."

A Resistance fighter came running from around the corner. He was panting and spoke frantically, "Sir, thank God you're here! We're!" A trio of bullets hit him in the back.

"Dammit!" Palmer shot the Combine soldier behind the dead fighter. Looking ahead, I saw the raging battle in the plaza. Mortar shells and grenades had torn pits into the pavement, and unreal amounts of gunfire produced a deafening roar.

"Push! Push! Push!" The four of us sprinted towards the bulk of the Resistance forces and dove into cover. I reloaded my SCAR-16 and my magnum as one of the fighters' eyes lit up.

"Hey guys, it's Colonel Freeman! Freeman's here!"

"Whoa, no kidding?"

"Yeah! We're gonna be okay!" He turned to me, "With you here, sir, we can finally make some headway. Let's stick it to 'em!"

000

Back aboard the Razor's Kiss, Shephard's assault force was gridlocked. They were a dozen men down and most of the squads weren't even halfway to their targets. Alpha and Bravo squads, however, were starting to make some headway. Half of the platoon's casualties were from A and B squads, but they were forcing their way through the enemy lines.

"Room is clear," a marine sounded off as he shot down a Combine crewman. Not five seconds after he was finished speaking, the hatch across from them swung open and a QRAT squad appeared. The four Quick Reaction Assault Team operators took up positions and started pouring fire at the three marines, Shephard included.

"_Room is clear,_" one of the jarheads mocked his friend, "You just had to open your mouth, didn't you?"

Shephard spoke into his radio, "Bravo Squad, this is Dragon. We are pinned down and need support." The first marine fired back and ended up trading his life for one of the enemy soldiers'. "Bravo, this is Dragon. Need immediate support, over." The other surviving marine ducked back as a pair of bullets pinged off the pipe next to him. "Bravo Squad, where the hell are you?"

A synthesized voice yelled, "Shit! Get down!" There was an explosion, and then:

"Did I get 'em, sir?"

"That's affirmative, Bravo. Let's move!"

The team moved through the ship until the bridge was just ahead. A lone naval crewman cranked out a couple of rounds from his pistol before he was gunned down.

"Go, go, go! The CIC is just around the corner!"

A swarm of lead came out of nowhere and cut down two of the HECU troops.

"Sentry turrets! Take cover!"

A third marine took a shotgun slug in the back and crumpled to the deck. Shephard whirled around and beat down the QRAT trooper before shooting him in the head.

"Bitters, toss me a shocker!" The colonel caught the EMP grenade his marine threw him and turned the device over in his hands. "Shock charge, going out!" Shephard pitched the grenade down the hallway and waited for the sentry turrets' manic whining error noises before motioning his men forward. The three surviving marines took up positions just outside of the bridge. Shephard made a fist, cupped it

in his other hand, and jerked his thumb behind him. Grenades. His men nodded and lanced their last frag grenades into the port and starboard crew pits, killing their occupants instantly. The pair then stormed the bridge, but they were both gunned down.

Shephard was alone.

With more acting than thinking, the colonel dropped low and did a combat slide beneath the enemy fields of fire and shot Captain Gomez. Shephard's M4 clicked empty, forcing him to ditch the carbine and pull out his pistol. Frasier stopped when she realized whom she was facing.

"Adrian?"

"Hello, Karen. What a pleasure to see you again."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Everything's okay; I found the Tylenol. It's taboo not to post something on Christmas, in my opinion. Besides, I wanted to give you all something for the holidays; consider it a gift from me to you. In rain or shine, you can always count on â€" wait a second, I live in Portland, so just rain. So, in showers or downpours, you can always count on me to come through for you wonderful guys and girls. I wish you all a great holiday and all my best for 2015!

Cheers,

SergeantLawson

12. Reinforcements

Chapter 12: Reinforcements

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** O exalted followers, I come to thee on this day bearing the gift of fanfiction. I know it's been a long couple of months, but I'm back again! My thesis paper (20 pages, 1.5 line spacing) is due this week, so I've been running around like a stabbed rat to get it done. After many long days and nights, the beast has finally been tamed, which allowed me to finish this chapter. What you are about to read is the product of short sporadic writing sessions, so don't expect A-grade quality. It's by no means my best work, but my Half-Life cult thought it was pretty good nonetheless.

On another note, someone asked me how I envision Combine fighter jets. If you have seen Captain America: Winter Soldier, think of the S.H.I.E.L.D. planes. Downsize them a bit and put a bunch of missile pods under the wings and a pair of autocannons in the sides of the nose. That's the best way I can describe them.

Also, an individual whom has asked to remain anonymous has come forward and told me that they found my title for the Combine assassin unit (Vixen Squad) to be offensive towards women. I don't know how many of my fans agree, but I deeply apologize to anyone who shares this viewpoint. My intention was never to appear sexist or insensitive; I hold both genders equally in my mind. In light of this, I am changing the team's designation from "Vixen Squad" to

"Phantom Squad." I have been progressively revising and editing my old chapters for the purpose of re-uploading a more presentable version, and I will go back and make the necessary changes immediately. Again, I extend my sincerest apologies to everyone affected.

Enjoy.

000

The fight in the plaza had ground to a perpetual stalemate. Forces from both sides trickled steadily in, plugging holes and replacing casualties. Combine artillery shells howled and boomed as they arced toward us. Jet engines screamed from high above as HECU pilots battled Overwatch airmen. Gunfire rattled out from both factions' swarming ground troops. Twisted, lifeless bodies dotted the field, and more fell by the minute. The whole scene smelled like smoke and death.

This was real war, and we wouldn't be taking a single step backward.

000

Forty thousand feet up, Shephard held Admiral Frasier at gunpoint.

"Hello, Karen. What a pleasure to see you again."

Frasier casually dropped her rifle but didn't bother raising her hands. "You won't shoot me," she said matter-of-factly, "You can't."

Shephard gestured with his pistol, "So this is what you've become?"

The flag officer scoffed, "I could ask you the same question. Look at you; an ignorant fanatic bent on replacing order with chaos; government with anarchy."

"Don't feed me that line," the marine replied flatly, "We both know you can do better than that."

Frasier paced slowly back and forth, occasionally glancing at her counterpart, "How long has it been, Adrian? Seventeen yearsâ€| eighteen, maybe? I've lost track."

He narrowed his eyes, "What's your point?"

Frasier pivoted back towards him, "My point isâ€| look at where I stand now; Fleet Admiral of the finest navy this world has ever seen. What do you have?"

Shephard stood tall, "I have the last of the United States Marine Corps at my back, and we will not go down without a fight."

Frasier laughed, "The fight is over."

"It's far from over, and this carrier's shields are about to go offline."

A flicker of worry flashed across Frasier's face, but it was gone instantly. She smiled, "Very clever, Adrian. I wasn't born yesterday."

Shephard kept up the pressure, "You know what I think, Karen? I think you're afraid. You've been caught off guard, and you don't know what to do."

The admiral dodged his mental assault, "The Resistance calls me a murderer, but they forget about you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Black Mesa."

He had expected her to play that card and wasted no time making her regret it, "And who sent in the black ops teams? The ones who tried to kill off my entire division? The ones who tried to kill me?"

"I was following orders," she said with less certainty than she would have liked.

"And how was I doing anything different?"

"You were targeting civilians."

Shephard felt a pang of remorse for his actions two decades past, but he couldn't let it distract him now. Several seconds passed as the colonel struggled to come up with a counter. When it finally hit him, it was perfect.

"Do you remember the ring I gave you all those years ago? You were still wearing it when you gave that order, Karen. Did that mean anything to you?" Shephard's next words cut deep into what was left of her soul, "Did we mean anything to you?"

Checkmate.

000

On the ground, we were growing desperate. This was becoming a war of attrition and we simply didn't have the manpower to compete; Overwatch had us outnumbered four to one at least. Coupled with their superior technology, the enemy was almost indomitable. Our best chance was the HECU, but the airdropped recon teams could make little difference without fire support.

We needed armor, and we needed it now.

I shouted over the chaos, "Palmer! I need a SITREP on that friendly armor; where are they?"

"I'm getting nothing. Comms are weak and unreadable; there's too much interference."

I continued firing, "We'll all be dead if support doesn't show up soon!"

Somewhere down the line, a Resistance fighter spotted a new threat.

She cried out, "They've got IFVs on the north side!"

We both glanced over to see a trio of black M3 Bradley fighting vehicles roll in. They stopped in a line and opened up, machine guns spitting lead at the exhausted Resistance fighters. We lost a whole squad in just seconds, and the APCs didn't show any signs of stopping.

Owens knelt down and reloaded his F2000. "Sir, we need to do something _now!_"

Another shell slammed into the ground and I swore as concrete dust showered over our heads. "Owens, Palmer, get ready to move. On my mark, break right and follow me." The two men nodded and waited for my command. "Threeâ€| Twoâ€| Oneâ€| go!"

We broke from cover and sprinted for the nearest building. I dipped my shoulder and ran through the door with Palmer and Owens right behind me.

"Freeman, the fight's in the plaza! What are we doing here?"

I saw a Combine security camera and shot it. "We're taking out those IFVs. Owens, do you still have the C4 we grabbed at Nova Prospekt?"

"Primed and ready to go."

"Okay, here's what we're going to do. I need you and Palmer to get close to those IFVs however you can, and then use the C4 to blow them away. Palmer, keep Owens alive. I'll head for the roof and cover you from above."

Palmer raised an eyebrow, "Freeman, you don't have any ranged weapons. How are you going to cover us from the roof?"

"I'll figure it out. _Semper Fi_, right?"

"Right. Owens, you ready?"

"Yeah, let's go."

I slung my SCAR-16 across my back and pulled out Allers' Eviscerator. "Good luck, gentlemen." Palmer opened a door next to him and the pair moved out.

I turned the shotgun over in my hands and read Allers' last words, _"NEVER GONE,"_ once again.

Rest well, Allers. I'll make sure you fell for something great.

000

"_Did we mean anything to you?"_ Frasier's heartrate quickened at those words.

The marine continued his mental assault, "Did you even give a thought to us? To the thousands of deaths you ordered with the stroke of a pen?"

"And you? Did you give a thought to the civilians your men were gunning down?"

"Yes, I thought long and hard about each and every one of them. What you like to forget is that if I didn't do it, someone else would have."

"Adrian, you have been hiding behind that excuse for too long. What difference would it have made if someone else gave the order?"

"The HECU were black ops; everything we touched was classified and the public didn't even know we existed. If anyone else had been sent in there, imagine what would have happened when it got out. Riots in the streets, maybe even a full-on revolutionâ€¦ I couldn't let that happen."

Frasier raised an eyebrow. "Are you seriously trying to uphold that archaic idiom? That what you don't know can't hurt you?"

"That's exactly what I'm upholding."

The admiral paused for a moment, and then her trademark cunning smile broke across her features. "Tell me, Adrian, why are you stalling? What could you possibly hope to accomplish through delaying me?"

Shephard's reply was overly casual, "Remember those shields I mentioned earlier?" He motioned at her datapad, "You might want to check on that."

Frasier turned her attention to her datapad and paled at the red warning messages on the screen. Two fingers immediately went to her earpiece. "Engineering, SITREP!"

Shephard cracked a smile of his own. "Something wrong, Karen?"

A unique look of horror manifested itself on the fleet commander's face. All she could say was: "How?"

"You would be surprised what my men are capable of." Without the shields, the HECU air fleet's relentless missile barrages only served to prove his point. "It's over, Karen."

With no other option, Frasier drew her pistol. "Nothing is over while I am still breathing!" she roared at him.

Shephard brought his own weapon back up. "Drop the gun, Karen."

"No!"

"Come with me and we can both walk away from this. I promise you'll get your day in court. I can help you; just put the gun down."

After what seemed like an eternity, Frasier relaxed her arms. She lowered her gunâ€¦

And put a hole in Shephard's knee.

The colonel fell backwards and clamped a hand on his wounded leg, groaning in pain. Frasier slowly paced towards him, her HK45 at her side.

"Did you really think I would give in that easily, Adrian?"

Her counterpart grit out, "Please, don't make me do this."

Frasier stepped over and kicked Shephard's gun out of his hand. "You want to shoot me," she asserted, "So why didn't you pull the trigger when you had the chance?"

Shephard narrowed his eyes. "Believe me, I would certainly have liked to."

Frasier chuckled and shook her head as she leaned over him, "No. No, you haven't shot me because despite all your efforts to convince me otherwise, you, Colonel Adrian Shephard, have a conscience."

Shephard inched his fingers across his Kevlar vest, "Get to the point. You're boring me."

"Everyone has a weakness, Adrian. Your archaic 'morality' is yours."

Shephard found what he was searching for and wrapped his hand around the object's hilt. "You talk too much."

The admiral gasped and her eyes flew open wide at the sudden flare of pain. Her jaw hung open as she looked down at Shephard's combat knife, the blade buried halfway in her stomach. Frasier's hazel-brown eyes welled with tears as Shephard pulled a frag grenade off his gear belt.

"We'll meet again in hell, Karen," he pulled the pin and flicked off the spoon. Frasier barely had time to jump backwards before the grenade went off and everything turned white.

000

I laid flat at the edge of the roof, tracking the duet's progress. They had reached the first IFV without being seen, but luck would only take them so far.

"Owens, SITREP."

His disembodied voice answered, "Rigging a charge; standby Okay, I got it. First IFV is ready to blow. We're moving on to the next - Palmer, watch your left!" Muffled gunfire erupted through my earpiece and I saw muzzle flashes by one of the vehicles.

"Owens? Owens, talk to me!"

The recon specialist swore over the radio, "Palmer's dead and I'm pinned down!"

I searched for something to help him and remembered the weapon Corporal Malone had given me. The young fighter's words came back to

mind as I pulled the Tau Cannon Mk II off my back and disengaged the safety. _We lost a lot of people getting that gunâ€¦ I hope it was worth it._ I flipped up the weapon's holographic smart scope and shifted into a firing position. The gun's targeting system identified the enemy soldiers and tagged each of them with a red marker. I lined up on a pair of Overwatch troops and squeezed the trigger. A brilliant orange beam lanced out of the gun and vaporized both soldiers, causing the rest to jump back in shock.

I wasted no time in targeting another soldier as I radioed Owens, "I'll try to keep them off you! Just get the hell out of there!"

"No; I have to finish this! I'm making a break for the next IFV!"

"Owens, I said get out of there! That's an order, sergeant!"

"Well then forgive the insubordination, sir. I'd appreciate some covering fire." There was no stopping him.

I set to work zapping Combine soldiers as Owens split like a madman for the second vehicle. A squad of grey and blue appeared on his right and I shifted my attention accordingly. I had neutralized three of them when I saw Owens fall to the ground and start crawling. He'd been shot through the knees but he was still going. One of the Combine soldiers stepped over, aimed his rifle at Owens' headâ€¦ and went running for the front lines with the rest of his buddies. _What?_

A heavy boom echoed through the square as one of the Combine IFVs exploded and flipped over backwards. The second and third vehicles suffered the same fate. Combine squads began retreating left and right, firing over their shoulders as they pulled back further into the city.

Looking back to our lines I saw a quartet of Humvees come in, flanked by never-ending dual columns of marching infantry. The HECU troopers broke into a full sprint as soon as they hit the square, gaining ground on their fatigued Overwatch counterparts.

A helmetless blond-haired officer cried out, "Firing line!" Dozens of marines dropped into position alongside exhausted Resistance fighters. "LIGHT 'EM UP!" Gunfire roared out of countless M4 carbines and tracer rounds flashed across the square. Overwatch troops who tried to hold their ground were gunned down mercilessly; the rest cut and ran. Bruised and battered Resistance fighters cheered wildly as more and more HECU support arrived. I couldn't even begin to count their numbers. After the scores of Humvees, there came the M3 Bradley fighting vehicles. Tanks came trundling down the lane soon after, along with rocket artillery and mobile surface-to-air missile batteries. The supply trucks came last and were closely guarded the whole way in.

I ran back down the stairs and out into the plaza. HECU medics were spread across the battlefield, tending to wounded Resistance fighters. I found Owens where he'd fallen, groaning in pain. I waved my arms and called for aid. A pair of medical corpsmen joined us and immediately set to work. One of them administered a shot of morphine into Owens' veins while the other bound up and immobilized his

legs.

"We need to move him. I've got his legs; you take the shoulders." The second medic knelt down and looped his arms under Owens' shoulders.

"Okay, lift on three. One. Two. Three." The corpsmen lifted Owens off the ground and started jogging back through the HECU lines, where a temporary triage center was being set up. I kept pace alongside them, reassuring Owens that he was going to be fine. I stayed by his side as they laid him out on a cot but had to move afterwards to give the medics the space they needed.

My ears perked up at a familiar voice, "Gordon!"

I turned around. "Alyx, you made it!"

She rested her hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow, "Surprised?"

"Not in the slightest. How many stormtroopers did you bag?"

"Mmmâ€¦ 'bout a dozen. You?"

"Lost count."

She shook her head. "I just can't believe this is finally happening."

One of the marines jumped up and pointed at the sky. "Look!"

We all tracked our eyes up to the still raging dogfight. Just minutes before, HECU missiles had splashed harmlessly against the Combine supercarrier's shields. Now, the aviators' barrages were blowing off armor plates. The vessel's defense systems were on overdrive trying to repel the assault, but the lasers and cluster missiles couldn't hold the line for long. Holes were soon punched in the screen of guns and the airmen let loose with everything they had. The hull was breached somewhere in the ship's lower decks and a dozen Combine crewmen were sucked out.

A marine wearing wraparound sunglasses and a red recon beret approached me. "Dr. Freeman?"

"Yes?"

"CO wants to see you."

"Sounds important. Lead the way." The marine nodded and started walking with Alyx and I in his wake. We passed marines unloading crates of weapons as we followed the HECU trooper. He eventually led us to an APC which had just stopped at the south edge of the plaza. The vehicle's ramp descended and a half-dozen marines sprinted out while a seventh looked on intently. My escort cleared his throat and his counterpart turned to face us.

"Sergeant Kelly reporting, sir!" The NCO didn't salute because this was a combat zone; enemy snipers were still a possibility.

"Thank you, sergeant. Gordon Freeman, I presume?" He extended his

hand and I shook it. "Lieutenant-Colonel Strickland. I'm Colonel Shephard's XO; he put me in command of the ground assault."

"I'm thankful for the support, Strickland. Your people just saved a lot of mine."

"You gave us the chance to help."

"Where are your men heading next?"

He took a breath. "That's actually why I wanted to see you."

"Come again?"

"You know this city. We don't."

"Well, firstly, it would be in our best interests to coordinate our forces. The HECU has firepower and military precision. The Resistance knows City 17 inside and out. Put that together, and that makes us much more effective."

"I can't argue with that. Now, where should we attack next?"

"Civil Protection HQ is six miles north of here, give or take. I don't know about the military, but CP and CPIF forces are undoubtedly using it as a command post. If we take CP headquarters, we could seriously cripple their defensive effort. Even better, the Citadel is just two clicks east from there."

"Then we have our target. What kind of security can we expect?"

"I hate to admit it, but I have no idea what's inside. I know the building's layout, but they could have anything set up to stop us."

"Exterior?"

"CPIF will be crawling all over the lawn, along with military reinforcements. Other than that, I can't give much intel; we've never been able to get anyone inside."

Strickland took a few moments to process what I had said before giving a nod. He slipped his aviators on and picked up his M4. "Alright. Let's pull the trigger."

000

Karen Frasier, Overwatch Fleet Admiral and Chief of Naval Operations, slowly came to. She was sprawled out on her back, staring blankly at the ceiling. Split wires hung down, sparking and sizzling. Frasier looked across the bridge and saw Shephard, his body slumped against the wall. He was dead, yes, but his eyes still held their look of rugged determination. That same look had served to draw her in twenty-six years ago. Frasier quickly pushed those thoughts out of her mind and returned to more pressing issues. She turned her head to the left and spied her forty-five next to her. The officer stretched her arm out and pulled the weapon towards her. She rolled her head in the other direction and retrieved her datapad but realized it was useless; its back was full of shrapnel from Shephard's grenade.

Her datapad, of all things, had saved her life.

But Frasier was by no means unwounded. As she brought her left arm up to her face she saw three shards of metal sticking out of her palm, a thin red trail running from each one. The admiral tried to stand but her leg screamed out in protest and forced her back to her knees. Looking down, Frasier noticed a second handful of fragments in her thigh and a dark stain in her slacks. She checked herself further and found another wound in her left side. Countless miniature shards of metal porcupined her flank and the area was slick with blood. Regardless of the pain and the bleeding, she needed to get moving. The admiral tried standing again, slower this time, and managed to stay shakily on her feet. She found that she could walk—well, _limp_ really, so long as she didn't put any strain on her left leg.

A voice came weakly from her left, "Admiral—" It was Captain Gomez. So he had survived after all. He was bleeding profusely from the stomach as he slowly crawled to his superior. "Help—" he breathed as his fingers reached out for the admiral. She looked on impassively as the captain continued his pleas. "Help me—please—"

Frasier cocked her pistol's hammer. "Captain Gomez, you are relieved of duty." The shot's muzzle flash reflected in her eyes. Frasier heard movement behind her just as the man's body hit the deck. The admiral spun and immediately fired a reaction shot.

"Whoa! Friendly fire! Friendly fire!" It was Phantom Squad's two survivors. Relieved, Frasier lowered her weapon.

"Chief, I've got the hallway covered. Help the CO."

"Right." The woman in front holstered her pistol and put her arm around the admiral. "Ma'am, am I hurting you?" Frasier shook her head. "Okay. We're taking you to your evac shuttle."

That task was easy enough; the command crew's escape pod was just thirty meters aft. Actually, it _would have_ been easy had Frasier not practically eaten a grenade just minutes ago, but they managed anyway. As the trio was boarding the shuttle, Frasier held up a hand.

"Wait," she said.

"What is it?" asked her escort.

Frasier dug her access card out of her pocket and handed it to one of the Phantoms. "Take this. Get to my quarters ASAP. There's a black duffel bag in the closet. Get it safely back here."

"Copy that."

"My laptop too. That computer does _not_ fall into enemy hands."

"Understood." The lieutenant took the small black keycard, engaged her active camo and disappeared. Her companion helped Frasier into the shuttle. The flag officer strapped herself into one of the jumpseats while the specialist kept a close eye on the hallway. A

mere minute later, the second Phantom materialized inside the shuttle, laptop and duffel bag in hand.

"Package is secure. Are we clear to go?"

Frasier took one last long look around before giving consent. The lieutenant took the pilot's seat and fired up the engines. On paper, the Razor's Kiss was an interplanetary aircraft supercarrier, the flagship of any Combine fleet. She couldn't even begin to fathom the time and funding required for building such a ship. Finances were not the real loss here, though. The Razor's Kiss had grown to be more than a military vessel to her. Over the years it had become, for all intents and purposes, her home. Leaving was difficult to say the least; it felt like she was betraying something she cared very much for. Frasier spent the next few moments convincing herself that it had to be done, and just pushing through would make it easier.

After all, she had done it once before.

Frasier let out a lamenting sigh as the shuttle exited the combat zone and headed southwest. The CPO across from her raised her head.

"Admiral, is something wrong?"

The officer shook her head. "No. I just rememberedâ€¦" she turned her gaze to the rear window and her dying ship, "Today's my fiftieth birthday."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Well fire me out of a cannon and call me the Air Force! That's twelve chapters done and dusted! It's sure been a ride but now I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and I'm glad all of you were there with me every step of the way. The poll for my second fic (Black Mesa vs. Episode One) is still on my profile. I haven't checked the stats in a while but it's probably still anyone's race. Got no idea when the next chapter's gonna be done, so hang in there!

Cheers!

SergeantLawson

13. Follow Freeman

12

Chapter 13: Follow Freeman

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Hey, look at that! It's only been a month this time! Yep, the sarge is back with more Uprising. While I was writing this, I realized (derp) I forgot to introduce the gravity gun, so I'm shoe-horning it up this chapter's ass and hoping I don't get too much hate mail. I can't give anything else away without having to slap on a spoiler tag, so quit reading my egotistical opinions and get to the good stuff!

000

The man was scrolling through a mission report when a knock came at his door. He stood and smoothed the wrinkles out of his dress uniform.

"Come."

The office door slid up into the ceiling and revealed a frantic yeoman in his mottled black and blue Airwatch BDUs. "Sir, Airman 1st Class Bradley reporting! I need you to come with me, sir! It's important, Iâ€"

General Roland stepped forward. "Slow down, Airman." The enlisted man squeezed his eyes shut and took one, two, three deep breaths. "Now, what do you need?"

"Sir, the CNO just contacted us."

"Fleet Admiral Frasier? Why would she contact us?"

"I don't know, sir, but it can't be good."

"How do you figure?" inquired Roland.

"The admiral ordered me to find you, sir; she said she would only speak to you directly."

"Very well. Thank you, Airman."

The yeoman snapped off a salute before departing. Roland retrieved his datapad from his desk and wired in his navy blue earpiece before leaving his office. Men in Roland's path stepped well aside as he made his way to the Airwatch base's conference room. Once inside, the general connected his datapad to a plasma monitor that occupied the far wall. Roland waited a short moment before the video feed came through and Fleet Admiral Frasier appeared on the screen.

General Roland opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out when he saw the flag officer's condition. Frasier's perpetually spotless white dress uniform was wrinkled, stained and torn. Her lower lip was split. A lock of her brunette hair hung down over her right eye. There was a thin bright red gash across her opposite cheek that had clearly bled recently. Alarmed and concerned for his fellow commander's safety, Roland dropped the formality of rank.

"Frasier, what the hell happened to you?"

The admiral leaned in close to the camera. "General Roland, listen to me very carefully. SC-1 Razor's Kiss is under attack. City 17 is under attack. The President is under attack! My pilots are losing air superiority and I am losing my ship! I need everything you have, yesterday!"

Roland nodded, "Understood; I'm sending air support now."

"Save my ship, Roland! Save my ship!" Frasier cut the link.

Roland keyed his earpiece, "Scramble! Scramble! Scramble!" His two hundred pilots heard the call and sprinted for their assigned locker rooms to suit up. Roland maintained a professional demeanor as he

strode across the base to the air control tower, with no idea what was coming his way.

Just a few kilometers to the south-west, a squadron of A-10 Warthog attack jets bore down on the Airwatch base. Each plane was weighed down with a trio of bombs attached to both wings.

"_This is Group Leader. Time on target: twenty seconds. Stay on heading zero-three-zero."_

"_Roger, zero-three-zero."_

As they reached the base's perimeter line, the fighters formed an arrowhead and armed their weapons. On the ground, a Combine pilot was climbing the ladder to his jet when he heard the screech of the engines. He turned his eyes skyward, identified the planes, and realized they were in an attack formation. The pilot screamed at those around him to take cover, but it was already too late.

"_Switch to bombs. Target hangars and airstrip; wait for my mark."_

"_Copy, switching to bombs. Targeting hangars and airstrip."_

"_Threeâ€| Twoâ€| Oneâ€| Mark."_

"_Firing."_

High-explosive bombs left the planes and whistled through the air as they dropped to their targets. The explosions started at the south end of the airstrip and continued north through the runway and hangars as the HECU pilots carpet bombed the base. A massive blossom of orange blinded those below as one of the warheads blew up a munitions stockpile. Once the squadron had expended its ordnance, the pilots banked away from the compound and headed back towards Nova Prospekt. The airmen exchanged congratulations as they left Sector 17's Airwatch base burning in their wake.

"_Zulu One to base. Target neutralized, say again, target neutralized. Airwatch base destroyed; we're heading home."_

For now, Airwatch was out of the game.

000

We had just broken through another Combine defense line, but not without taking heavy casualties. Forty men and women laid dead, another twenty wounded. How many more would fall today? Tomorrow? A week from now? I didn't know, but I feared the answer. Would we draw a line in the sand and refuse to cross it? Or would we sacrifice everything, and everyone, for total victory? Alyx was silent next to me, but I could tell she was pondering the same questions.

A voice behind me interrupted my thoughts, "Right this way, Doctor." We both turned around and saw none other than Dr. Kleiner, escorted by a Resistance fighter. The physicist had changed out of his white lab coat in favor of a navy blue long-sleeve shirt and had covered his balding hair with a knit cap. Being one of the Resistance's top

scientists, he didn't want to paint a target on his back.

"Ah, Gordon! Still in one piece, I see?" We shook hands and he turned to Alyx. "And a fine hello to you, Miss Vance." He could be overly chivalrous at times.

My eyes instinctively darted around for Combine soldiers. "Isaac, there's a war going on. What are you doing out here?"

"To give you one of my greatest creations." He set his pack down, reached inside, and pulled out something that immediately caught my attention. "I call it the Zero-Point Energy Field Manipulator." It was roughly cylindrical, painted black, and had plenty of exposed wires running along its surface. It looked like a flare gun from hell. Three prongs, angled inwards, stuck a few inches out of the front side. I presumed these were conductors of some kind. There were two triggers instead of one.

"Kleinerâ€¦ you called it a 'zero-point energy field manipulator'. Does that mean this thing can create a contained selectively-directed singularity?"

"Precisely," Kleiner affirmed proudly.

Alyx cut in, "English, please?"

I turned to face her, "Alyx, Kleiner's new toy can pick things up and launch them."

Her eyes widened, "So you can just toss the Combine around now?"

"Not exactly. It only works on inanimate objects, and there are limits to the amount of mass it can carry."

"You mean it only works on non-living things."

"Yeah, and I can't exactly move a tank with it, either."

"Well, then what can you pick up?"

"That depends. Kleiner, I'm seeing two triggers here. Can you give me a quick run-down?"

Kleiner snapped his fingers, "Ah, yes; I believe I can acquaint you with the basics. Firstly, though, you must promise me that you will exercise the utmost caution with this device. It is very delicate, andâ€¦"

I raised my right hand, "Doctor Isaac Kleiner, I solemnly swear I won't scratch your baby."

"Thank you, Gordon. Now, you will have to be quite close to the target object in order to affect it."

"How close?"

"About three meters. If you activate the primary trigger, you will push the object in question away. If you activate the secondary trigger, you will pull the object towards you and suspend it a

half-meter in front of the device. Once you have 'captured' an object, you may use the secondary trigger again to gently release itâ€¦ or use the `_primary_` trigger to send it on its way."

I attempted to summarize Kleiner's lengthy tutorial, "So, basically: pull trigger one, thing gets pushed. Pull trigger two, thing gravitates to me. Pull trigger two again, thing drops. Pull trigger one instead, thing gets pushed. Is that about right?"

"Yes, Gordon; that is an excellent summary."

I looked around for a test object and spied a traffic cone a few feet to my left. "Kleiner, could I borrow that for a minute?"

"Certainly." The doctor handed me the large, black, somewhat-cylindrical device with almost ceremonial deliberation. I turned it over in my hands a few times, inspecting its outer workings. I searched around for a test object and found an empty overturned trash bin to my left. I took aim and squeezed the primary trigger. The conduits flashed a bright orange and the gun boomed like a gauss cannon. The unfortunate trash bin became a blur as it shot across the street, flipping end over end with dizzying speed. It smashed a window and sailed into the vacant building behind it, where the opposite wall finally managed to bring the trash can to a stop.

Alyx's jaw dropped, "Ho-ly crap."

The doctor smiled, "Not exactly the words I would choose, but it `_is_` a marvel of engineering."

Alyx continued, "So, you said you can't exactly move a tank. Butâ€¦ how big can we go with thisâ€¦ thisâ€¦" She struggled to remember the device's overcomplicated name.

Kleiner offered a helping hand, "The Zero-Point Energy Field Manipulator?"

I occupied the next few seconds with a complex series of calculus equations and came up with nothing. "Only one way to find out: field-testing." Alyx and I shared a knowing grin.

"Needs a different name. I'm thinkingâ€¦ 'the gravity gun'. How about it, Gordon?"

"It's got a nice ring to it. I'm down."

My earpiece crackled. `_"Colonel Freeman?"_`

I brought two fingers up to the device, "Yes?"

`_"We've got a Combine trooper in custody; he surrendered without firing a shot. He's wearing all black, and his gear's like nothin' I've ever seen. He says he needs to speak with you, sir."_`

I pondered this for a moment before replying, "I'm on my way." I cut the link and turned to the duo before me. "Kleiner, I need you to get some place safe. I'll take good care of your gravity gun."

Kleiner sighed, "Very well, Gordon. Do take care." He headed inside one of the Resistance-occupied buildings.

"Alyx? I could use an escort."

She smirked, "Yeah, you sure could. Don't worry; I'll protect you."

Well, shit. I walked right into that one, didn't I?

We found the Resistance fighter a block away. He and three others were in cover behind cars and had their submachine guns trained on the Combine soldier in question. The trooper was dressed in black fatigues and wore some kind of prototype composite body armor made of several interlocking plates, though he lacked a helmet. His wraparound sunglasses gave off a faint glow around the lenses; a telltale sign of a built-in UI system. A row of 12-gauge shells occupied his forearms, and an M1014 automatic shotgun was slung across his back. A suppressed USP 45 handgun was holstered backwards on his left thigh, for a crossdraw. A trio of incendiary grenades were held in gear loops on the left side of his chest. He wore a black Overwatch earpiece and had a mic clipped to the front of his collar. On his left shoulder was a rectangular patch with an orange Combine insignia. On his right was another patch. This one portrayed a gold eagle with its wings spread over a black background. The words _Semper Vigilis_, "Ever Vigilant," were embroidered in white across the bottom, flanked by three stars on both sides. Everything about him seemed maddeningly familiar, but I couldn't put a name to the face.

Alyx whispered to me, "Gordonâ€¦ I think that's Ryan Walker."

The memories came flooding back in, from boarding the patrol boat to having his ID chip removed to briefing our command staff on Civil Protection's developments. This was the nineteen-year-old kid that got me to Black Mesa East in one piece. This was Ryan Walker.

I motioned to the quartet of Resistance fighters, "Stand down. He's friendly." Just like last time, nobody moved. "I said, stand down. You don't want to shoot a deep-cover Resistance agent, do you?" At that, they complied and left.

Alyx motioned, "Walker, what's with the new gear?"

He smiled, "Allow me to reintroduce myself. Agent Ryan Walker, AFI." So he was with the Agency of Field Intelligence nowâ€¦ that explained the eagle/_Semper Vigilis_ patch. The AFI was the Combine military intelligence agency. He looked fine, but I still had a few questions.

"Why aren't you dead? The higher-ups would have had you executed for helping the Resistance."

He pulled off his sunglasses and revealed his sapphire-blue eyes, "Actually, that worked out in my favor. Apparently someone up top liked me, because by the time the news got to Commissioner Thorn, he was told I 'exhibited a high degree of adaptability in an extreme situation, and showed unprecedented ingenuity through infiltration of Resistance ranks.' Next thing I know, I'm an AFI agent."

Alyx crossed her arms, "So, you're AFI. What does that mean for us?"

"It means everything. My high-level security access can get you almost anywhere. My advanced training makes me an extensively trained fighter, and a better thinker. I know every last Overwatch infantry tactic, and have detailed specs on most of their vehicles. I can shut down security systems, disable turrets, and override encryption locks—all with a fingerprint and retinal scan." He raised his eyebrows when neither one of us replied, "What?"

I blinked a couple of times, "You grew up fast."

Ryan chuckled and slicked back his sandy blond hair, "Yeah, thanks to you. You showed me what it's really like out there: grow up fast or die."

"I didn't do all the work."

"You gave me a push in the right direction. The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world."

I froze at his last sentence. "Where did you hear that?"

Ryan shrugged, "Heard it from some guy in a suit, the day the AFI recruited me." He rubbed his brow, "It was kind of weird, though. No one else seemed to notice him."

Alyx looked between us, "Gordon? What is it?"

I shook my head, "It's nothing. Let's go take out CPHQ."

Ryan shouldered his M1014 automatic shotgun and checked the sights, "Amen to that. It's payback time."

000

Night had fallen over City 17 when we finally laid eyes on Civil Protection Headquarters. Walker and I, along with three Resistance fighters, were crouching behind a statue on the far end of the lawn. Several of these stone erections were placed at different spots across the grass, each a different symbol of Combine power. There were recreations of the Citadel, the Razor's Kiss and the Combine insignia. President Breen and all of the Overwatch senior command staff had been immortalized, from Fleet Admiral Frasier to Major General Blake. Ironically, the five of us were using Commissioner Thorn as cover from the spotlights.

Walker shifted around to face me and whispered, "I'm moving up to get a better view. Hold here and wait for my mark." I nodded. The trio of Resistance fighters weren't ecstatic at the idea of taking orders from an Overwatch intelligence agent, but I felt differently. Walker had already proven himself to me on the water, and as the resident AFI field agent, he would have been briefed in full on the defenses in place at CPHQ. I was more than happy to let him take command.

He moved low and fast, scarcely making a sound as he slinked across the lawn to a thirty-foot Commander Thatcher. Once securely in cover, he pulled a fiber-optic camera off his belt and synced it to his UI glasses. The device was three feet long and no wider than a worm, but

it could provide a second set of eyes in places otherwise difficult or impossible to reach.

Walker snaked the fiber-optic camera up and over the statue's base. He panned it from left to right, taking in all that he could. The agent's hushed voice came through the radio.

"_Freeman, you need to see this. I'm sending you a video feed."_

"Copy; standing by." A grainy picture popped up in the upper-left corner of my HUD. I saw nothing but trouble. Fortified machine gun nests had been erected at both corners of the stone steps. A half-dozen teams, three men each, patrolled the grounds. All of them wore Dragon Skin body armor, with a blood-red stripe on their helmets. That meant one thing: JSOC.

"_Are you getting all this?"_

"Yeah," I whispered, "Looks like special ops took overâ€¦ that's going to make things a lot more complicated."

"_Not exactly. The Combine still doesn't know I've switched sides. I can take out some of those patrols without being noticed."_

I nodded to myself, "Do it, but be careful."

"_Freeman, if I wanted to be careful I would have joined the Coast Guard."_

"You already did, Walker." He grumbled something before replying.

"_I'm feeding my lens cam to you. Standby."_ The fiber-optic camera footage was replaced with his point of view.

"I'm receiving."

"_Roger that; movin' out."_

He kept to the shadows and made for a General Roland bust, where a patrol team had just marched past. The three men were between a pair of now-abandoned security postsâ€¦ completely out of their comrades' views. Walker moved like a ghost as he approached the Combine team. He drew his knife as he caught up to the guy at the rear. The AFI agent covered the soldier's mouth with a gloved hand and drove his double-edged blade through the side of his neck. The man went limp as the tip poked out the other side, his spine severed. Walker performed similar takedowns on the other two specialists before sheathing his knife.

Damn. He certainly _had_ grown up fast.

Ryan spied another patrol headed his way. Realizing there was no way to slip away undetected, he played his next best card. The agent knelt down next to one of the dead soldiers and pressed two fingers to his neck, feigning a pulse check. When the second fire team came around the corner, they all drew down on him but quickly identified him as an AFI agent. Walker held up a fist; the signal to "halt." The trio of specialists complied, backing up behind the security post and

tightening their ranks. He then motioned them into a defensive formation, where each man covered a third of the area around the squad.

They were now all facing different directions. _Very clever, Ryan._

Ryan introduced himself to the squad leader, "Agent Walker, AFI. Your boys are dead, Gunnery Sergeant." The man reached for his radio, but Ryan stopped him, "No. Don't call it in."

"Sir?" The squad leader questioned him.

"Don't call it in; that's exactly what they want you to do. The alarms go off, everyone comes to the front and they slip in through the back door."

The specialist still didn't agree with Walker, but he knew better than to question an AFI agent's plan. "Roger that."

"I need a SITREP, Gunny. Has security changed at all since I was last briefed?"

"No, sir. Fortifications with two machine gun nests in front, sniper and mortar teams on the roof, and siâ€" _five_ three-man patrol teams."

"Very well. Other than this," Walker motioned to the trio of dead soldiers, "Have you had any contact?"

"Negative, sir. From the reports we're gettingâ€"|" The squad leader paused before adding a personal query. "No one was expecting the HECU. The situation's bad, isn't it?"

Walker reassured him, "Don't worry," he pulled out his silenced USP, "I've got everything under control." There was a pair of sharp coughs, and the gunnery sergeant fell backwards.

The other two specialists spun around, "What theâ€"|" Walker shot one in the temple and the other in the forehead. The man on the left squeezed off a wild burst before he died, firing his SCAR-16 into the air as he dropped. A burst of static came through Walker's earpiece, followed by alarmed radio chatter.

"_Shots fired! Shots fired!_"_

"_Heads on a swivel; check your corners!_"_

"_We need more boots on the ground; call it in!_"_

"_Sir, I've got bodies over here!_"_

I keyed my transmitter, "Covert op is blown! Infantry, move in! I say again, infantry is go!"

"_Roger that; we're coming in loud._"_

I moved up as dozens of marines and Resistance fighters stormed across the street and onto the vast lawn. The four remaining Combine fire teams moved back to better positions and dug in for a final

stand.

"Suppressing fire! I'm moving up!"

The trio of fighters opened fire and I sprinted to the next statue. I dropped low and slid into cover just as the marine next to me caught a bullet in the teeth. A Combine specialist peeked around the corner and was immediately gunned down. Our forces continued trading fire and lives with theirs, but we were clawing our way forward. It wasn't long before the remaining Overwatch specialists were killed and the grounds secured.

A six-man HECU recon team lined up next to the front doors and set a breaching charge. The explosive detonated, sending the door flying off its hinges. The half-dozen troops stormed in, myself and a Resistance/HECU coalition following closely behind. I expected to walk into a wall of gunfire or heavily fortified positions. Instead there were rows of cubicles and countless CPs going about their business, most of them neither armed nor armored. The lobby quickly turned into a slaughterhouse, marines and fighters gunning down hapless policemen. These were the dispatchers, the supervisors, the number crunchers; people Civil Protection needed to maintain coordination. Rifles barked, shotguns boomed, pistols cracked, and blood flowed. It was like a scene from The Terminator.

Walker linked up with me as soon as we had cleared the lobby.
"Freeman, we gotta move! New contacts inbound!"

I jacked my rifle's slide, feeding a round into the chamber and locking it into place. "How many?"

"One."

I paused. "One?"

A burst of heavy machine gun fire came from the far end of the lobby, and someone's scream of pain was abruptly cut short.

I checked my sights, "What the hell was that?"

A pair of HECU marines came sprinting out of the hallway.
"JUGGERNAUT!"

I took aim down the hallway and waited for my target to appear. What came around the corner was, indeed, a juggernaut. That was bad; very, very bad.

With the possible exception of Phantom Squad's infiltrators, juggernauts are by far the most feared Combine troops. The sheer weight of their armor and weapons requires surgical augmentation. Their bones are heavily reinforced and their muscles strengthened far beyond natural limits; a juggernaut's punch carries enough force to dent steel. They are clad in a full body armor suit heavy enough to go toe-to-toe with a tank. That, coupled with their exponentially enhanced pain threshold, already makes them incredibly dangerous even without their apocalyptic arsenal. They carry an M2 50-caliber heavy machine gun, with the ammunition belt feeding into a backpack with four thousand rounds. Their backup weapon is none other than the dreaded eight-gauge Eviscerator shotgun. A juggernaut's loadout doesn't end there: dual Desert Eagles, kitted out with .44 magnum

high-explosive squash-head ammo, serve as their tertiary firepower.

One of the Resistance fighters jumped out of cover and yelled, "Come on, guys! Let's take this bastard out!" He had clearly never seen a juggernaut in combat before.

Walker tried to stop him, "No! Don't!" The man was already running towards death. He tossed a frag grenade right at the walking tank's feet and was surprised when the enemy kept on coming. The juggernaut threw his forearm into the fighter, shattering his entire ribcage and sending him to the floor. The Combine heavy raised up an armored boot and brought it down on his face.

Walker yelled loud and clear, "Everyone stay in cover! Switch to heavy weapons!" Acknowledgments came from all directions as insurgents and jarheads brought out their bigger guns.

I turned to the marine next to me, "I'm going for the fifty; cover me."

He nodded in consent and pulled a flashbang off his gear belt, "Give me a countdown."

I dropped into a running stance. "Three. Two. One."

The soldier called, "Flash out!" He stood, cocked his arm back, and was shot full of holes before he could throw it. The live flash grenade detonated just feet from me. My vision turned white and my ears rang so much that even the gunfire was drowned out. When my eyes finally cleared up, I looked just in time to see four more of us die. We couldn't use rockets indoors; the building could cave in on us. That gave the juggernaut a huge advantage. I reached up and poked my SCAR-16 around the cubicle wall. It was impossible to control the recoil, but blind-firing let me keep my face in one piece. The juggernaut returned the favor with a sustained burst of 50-caliber presents. The bullets tore gaping holes in my puny glass-and-steel-walled cover, but I couldn't change positions; my suit had an absolute zero chance of surviving firepower like that. I flattened myself to the floor and used my armored gloves to cover the back of my head and neck. His fire occasionally switched as other targets popped up, but if something didn't happen soon, I would be completely out in the open with nothing but an empty rifle in my hands.

000

Alyx laid flat on a roof opposite CPHQ, looking through an AS50 sniper rifle's scope. She hated waiting around like this, especially when she heard the desperate chatter coming from the radio on her hip. When she heard the words "Juggernaut" and "getting murdered," she had had enough. _Screw this._ Alyx left the rifle on the roof and bounded down the stairs to the waiting HECU motor pool. After a few moments, she found a Humvee near the front of the column. The armored car's driver wasted no time in questioning her.

"Vance, you're supposed to be on the roof. Lieutenant-Colonel Strickland's orders."

Alyx rolled her eyes, "Didn't anyone tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I'm not in your chain of command."

The marine's tone grew bitter, "Fine. What do you want?"

"Take the gun. I'm driving."

"Excuse me?"

"Yours and mine are being slaughtered in that building. I don't have time to play nice, so take the gun or stay here!"

The infantryman turned all business upon hearing of his comrades' predicament. He pulled his emerald-lensed gas mask down on his face and pressurized it. Alyx shut the door behind her as she took the driver's seat and turned the key. The Humvee's engine grumbled to life, and the gunner reported his readiness soon after. Alyx hit the gas and the armored car screeched forward. She steered the vehicle onto CPHQ's lawn as the Combine mortar crews took aim from the roof. Explosive shells dropped to the ground and tore pits in the earth. Alyx wrenched the Humvee's wheel from side to side, gritting her teeth as she fought for control. She leveled the Humvee at the front doors, but didn't slow down.

"What the hell are you doing?" the gunner cried down at her.

"Making an entrance!" Alyx shouted back as she floored it.

000

My SCAR made a hollow click as I emptied my last mag into the Combine shock trooper. The dead marine next to me still gripped his M4, and was carrying five spare clips. Taking his rifle felt wrong, but I had to if I wanted to survive. I checked the magazine currently in the gun and jacked the slide. Just as I was about to fire again, someone yelled out.

"Holy shit! Everybody down!"

I didn't ask why; I just hit the deck and covered my head. A mere second later, the front doors and the walls around them exploded into a million pieces. The Humvee's engine roared like a pissed off tiger as its tires made contact with the ground and skidded to a stop. I looked to see an HECU trooper open fire with the vehicle's M134 minigun, pouring fifty rounds per second into the juggernaut. The walking tank shuddered under the sheer volume of fire pounding his three-inch synthetic titanium armor. He staggered backwards but was still able to return fire. Somewhere in the whirlwind of lead, a stray round sliced through his jugular vein. The juggernaut's genetic enhancements couldn't compensate for that kind of blood loss. A handful of seconds later, he fell to his knees, keeled over, and finally died.

"Is he dead?" a young private timidly asked. Several marines and Resistance fighters put a couple of extra bullets into him just to be sure.

"Yeah. He's dead."

Walker jogged over to me. "Who the hell was driving that Humvee?" The driver's door popped open and a pair of combat boots jumped to the ground. Alyx walked around the door, shut it, and looked around at the bloody scene.

She adjusted her leather jacket with one hand and twirled her .44 magnum with the other. "Aw, crap. Did I miss the party?"

I chuckled, "You drove a Humvee through the wall of a police station. I'd say you started the party."

Alyx smirked, "I knew you couldn't handle yourself without me."
Screw it. I'm not even keeping score anymore.

Walker cleared his throat, "If you two are done flirting, we have a building to secure."

000

On the roof, the sun was just coming up as a Combine spec ops lieutenant tried to establish contact with anyone downstairs. After several unsuccessful attempts, he released his thumb from the radio clipped to his shoulder.

The LT motioned to his six men. "The juggernaut is down. Pack it up, I'm calling for evac." His troops confirmed his orders and started disassembling their deployable mortar cannons. Commissioner Thorn stormed around the corner, his hands balled into fists. Against the lieutenant's advice, the commissioner had declined to wear his gas mask. His fiery hair made him a target from six hundred yards away, but that was of no real concern to SOCOM (Special Operations Command).

"Lieutenant, what the hell are you doing?"

The officer sighed in exasperation and turned to face his counterpart. He felt things beyond irritation towards this tiresome man. Regulations clearly placed Civil Protection and general Overwatch infantry below special ops, but the commissioner still didn't get the message that he was not in charge.

"Commissioner, my men and I are pulling out."

"I did not authorize this! Return to your positions at once!"

The lieutenant's voice matched Thorn's confrontational tone, "Commissioner Thorn, I will say this one last time: you are not the senior officer here. As ranking SOCOM officer, I have operational control. The enemy is fighting their way up the stairs as we speak, and a few dozen cops, CPIF or not, won't be able to hold the line against highly trained military Special Forces personnel and crazed Resistance fanatics with machine guns!"

Thorn took a step inward, "Do you doubt my officers' skills?"

The lieutenant leveled his eyes at the commissioner, "I doubt much more than that."

"You will hold your positions!"

"I am not going to waste my men's lives just because some glorified pencil-pushing cop wants to inflate his ego! We are pulling out, and that is final!" Both men stopped for a moment to watch the dropship land on the helipad. The lieutenant took a breath and dropped his voice to normal levels, "You and your men are welcome to come along if you wish. There's room for everyone."

"My men and I will hold this rooftop with our lives."

The lieutenant pursed his lips and nodded, "Very well. Goodbye, Commissioner." He followed his squad into the dropship's troop bay. The hatch closed, and the craft's engines started up. Thorn's hair blew in the wind as the transport took off and left.

"Sir! They're cutting through the door!"

Thorn clenched his fists. "Damn. Positions!"

000

I turned around to address the ten Resistance fighters behind me as the HECU engineer put his blowtorch to work on the steel door. "You all know the drill. Split into teams of two and canvas the roof. Assume all CPs are hostile; shoot to kill."

The engineer called out, "Get ready." We all hunkered down. "Threeâ€¦ twoâ€¦ oneâ€¦" He kicked the door out of its frame and my men stormed onto the roof. Three of us were gunned down instantly, but the rest of us escaped the crossfire and set to work. These last remnants of City 17 CPIF had much better positions than us, and they made us fight for every inch. We lost two more men before they had to fall back to their second defensive line. One of the cops suddenly made a suicide run with a grenade in his hand. He took a burst in the chest, but the frag kept on rolling. When it exploded, it took a sixth man with it. After that, the gunfire stopped from their side.

The Resistance fighter next to me dropped to one knee and aimed her PPSH-41 submachine gun across the roof. "They wouldn't just run away like thatâ€¦"

I affirmed her statement, "I know. We're walking into an ambush." I took a breath before coming to a decision. "Everyone tighten up, but keep your distance behind me." The four remaining fighters wordlessly complied, forming up and staying well behind me. We moved cautiously forward, checking every corner and watching every shadow. I heard a gun click as I moved around a corner. I shifted into a firing stance and signaled my squad to move back.

Walker came around the opposite corner, "Hey, Freeman?" Before I could say anything, a trio of CPIF officers jogged around the bend and zeroed in on me. Commissioner Thorn came next, his Five-seven leveled at the side of Walker's head.

"Don't give them a damned thing."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Well, that's chapter thirteen done, and I apologize to any of my readers with tridecaphobia (the fear of the

number thirteen). Some of you may have forgotten about good old Ryan Walker. I decided a long time ago that I would bring him back in City 17, and my original plan was to have him die here. However, I realized I had already killed off Shephard and Allers, two fan favorites since their introductions, so I can say with a smile on my face that Walker will not die on that rooftop. Walker being yet another fan favorite, I couldn't imagine the sheer volume of rage that would flood my inbox.

In other news, I (for some reason) woke up this morning and thought, "Fuck it. I'm finishing Uprising before the end of the summer." With that in mind, it's bye-bye Counter-Strike until I grind this thing out. Another note: WHY HAVE ONLY THREE PEOPLE, INCLUDING MYSELF, VOTED ON MY POLL?! You must vote on the poll to have your opinion count, so get to it before it's too late!

Cheers,

SergeantLawson

14. One Last Push

Chapter 14: One Last Push

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Hmmâ€| how many times have I apologized for an unusually long wait? What's that you say, random reader/faithful follower? Enough to where it's pretty much the standard wait? I seeâ€| you're probably right but I'm apologizing anyway. I really haven't had time to work on this all summer because I've been applying for college and fishing for halibut in Alaska. Yeah, I know, two completely identical things. On a different note, I went to see the new Hitman movie this weekend; Hitman: Agent 47â€| and I may have jizzed in my pants. I'm just as big a Hitman fan as the next guy, and I can say it's much better than all the hate it's receiving. The ending (no spoilers) was a bit corny but I'm willing to hand-wave that in favor of a good movie overall. What's that you say, random reader/faithful follower? Shut up about Hitman because we came to read about your version of Half-Life 2? Fine, have it your wayâ€| but I'll be back.

Enjoy!

000

I raised my M4 at the commissioner, "Thorn, drop the gun or I will kill you where you stand."

He snickered, "I could say the same to you. Shoot me, and my men open fire. Take another step forward, and my men open fire. If your men move in, mine open fire. Try anything I don't likeâ€|"

"And your men open fire. I get it." I took a breath and asked the question negotiators fear the most, "So what do you want?"

Thorn gave me a look smug enough to piss anyone off. "Safe passage out of here for me and my men."

I jerked a thumb back at the Combine dropship flying away in the

distance, "If you want out, then why didn't you leave with them?"

"Because I would not abandon my duty to this city." I knew the real answer: he thought he was invincible, but when push came to shove, he bailed out like a coward.

"City 17 CP is finished, Thorn. Taking hostages won't change that."

"My officers may have failed, Freeman. But here?" He spread his arms to encompass the scene around him, "Up here I have complete control."

I locked eyes with Walker, and he gave me a nearly imperceptible shake of the head. "I'm sorry, but I can't guarantee you safe passage out of the city."

"Then this ends only one way."

I held out a hand to assuage his trigger finger, "I can order my fighters not to attack you, but I can't stop them from defending themselves. And I have no official command over the HECU whatsoever."

"That is not good enough, Freeman. I will not back down over a shallow promise from a man like you." He made sure those last three words were especially venomous.

I held my ground, "Neither will I."

"You have to the count of three to step aside."

"I'm not moving, so start counting."

He smirked. "One."

I glared into his eyes, "You don't have the balls, do you?"

Thorn hesitated for a split second. "Two."

My voice rose to a shout. "Do you?" He faltered again. "DO YOU?!" I practically screamed.

The commissioner yelled, "Three!" A trio of gunshots rang out, and the CPIF officers fell dead. Thorn, Walker, and I all turned to see a fourth CP stepping towards the commissioner with his gun drawn. Thorn roared at the CP, "Officer, what the hell are you doing?!"

The CP pulled off his mask. "My job." _Barney!_

"You _will_ put your weapon down, officer! That is a direct order!"

Barney took aim, "I don't take orders from you anymore, Colin." _Bang!_ Thorn cried out and lost his weapon, a hole in his right hand.

"Move in!" I called. The Resistance quartet spread out and held the commissioner at gunpoint. Thorn raised his hands, somehow managing to

suppress the pain from his wound.

Commissioner Thorn gave me a cunning smile, "Go on, then. Shoot me. Show everyone who you really are."

I locked the bolt on my M4 and thought of the hundreds of people his men had killed, "Maybe I will."

Thorn's grin deepened, "I know. I don't deserve to live, do I? Kill me, and rid the world of a war criminal." He leveled his eyes with mine, "It's the right thing to do."

That made me stop and think twice. I glanced at the rifle in my hands, then the weaponless tyrant, and finally at my six allies. Thorn wasn't going anywhere. He wanted me to kill him because it was exactly what he would do if our positions were reversed. The Combine were a merciless, immoral enemy. If I shot an unarmed prisoner, even if it were a man like him, would I be any different?

"Cuff him," I grit out.

Barney pulled a set of binders off his belt and moved behind the commissioner.

"No! Shoot me; damn you! Shoot me!" Thorn yelled among other unprintable things as Barney led him off the roof.

"Keep moving," the former CP ordered as he kicked Commissioner Thorn in the shins. The roof access door closed behind them, leaving the area quiet once more. Walker and the fighters gave me silent nods of respect.

A huge explosion ripped through the sky above us. I looked up, and what I saw made me wonder if Christmas had come early. The HECU airmen had just blown one of the Razor's Kiss's two main engines. Thick black smoke billowed out of the dead thruster as the ship's retreat slowed to a limp. F-15's and F-22's swarmed around the carrier like buzzards, chewing away at the last of its armor plating with their guns and missiles. The other engine soon went up as well, leaving the once-mighty Razor's Kiss dead in the air. Losing both engines sent an enormous amount of energy funneling back to the ship's already strained nuclear reactor. The surge pushed the readings far into the red zone, an irreversible problem even with direct intervention. Chains of internal explosions blossomed across the hull as the Razor's Kiss started to rip itself apart. Their primary mission accomplished, the HECU jets peeled off and moved to neutralize the last of the Overwatch Navy pilots. As Shephard's flyboys cleaned up City 17's airspace, the ship finally gave up. The Razor's Kiss became a small sun of red, orange and purple as its reactor melted down. Massive chunks of molten hull plating spun out of the maelstrom like angry Frisbees. When the flames finally died, the Razor's Kiss had been absolutely obliterated. All that remained were countless slabs of armor and unidentifiable masses of titanium debris. Citizens, rebels, and marines all around City 17 cheered as the Combine flagship died.

"Holy shit," I whispered inwardly, "He did it." I looked down at CPHQ's roof, then at the Razor's Kiss, and finally at the towering Citadel. That gets us two out of three. It's time to finish

this._

000

President Breen's office stood in sharp aesthetic contrast with the rest of the Citadel. Nearly all of the two-kilometer-high building's walls, ceilings and floors were made of the Combine's still-unknown synthetic blend of metals. This meant nearly everything on the Citadel was colored deep blue and nearly impenetrable. Breen's office was different simply because he wanted it to be. The dark crimson-carpeted floor tended to catch first-time visitors off guard, suddenly no longer hearing their footsteps echo. Breen's oak desk and stuffed leather swivel chair were situated at the far end of the room. The room had no light fixtures installed; a pair of large ceiling-to-floor windows behind the desk allowed the sun to provide natural illumination. Air pressure differences would cause conventional glass to shatter at this altitude, so aircraft-grade materials were used instead. All of this made for an amiable work atmosphere, but the eye candy was not all for the President's benefit. The President's office carried a certain air of sterility. Luxury. Tranquility. Those things sharply countered an everyday citizen's life in what some called a post-apocalyptic world. The subtle visual assault sent a clear message to all who entered: power is everything. But none of those things crossed the mind of the President or the two men with him.

President Breen sat in his stuffed leather chair, flanked by General Mikhailovich and Major General Blake. A forty-inch LED monitor hung down before them, from which General Roland reported the carpet-bombing of Sector 17's Airwatch base.

Mikhailovich balled his hands into fists, "Define 'gone', Roland."

Roland's tone mirrored his comrade's frustration, "Are you familiar with the effects of carpet bombing?"

"Are you familiar with the importance of air superiority?"

The President cut in, "That's enough, gentlemen." Both men held their tongues and allowed their superior to continue. Breen turned back to the LED screen, "They jumped you in the parking lot, Marcus. There was nothing you could have done."

"Sir, I should have seen this coming."

"What's done is done," Breen reaffirmed, "Right now, we need to focus on defending City 17. Unfortunately, you can no longer be of assistance in this matter." His words were not meant to chastise; they only spelled out the facts.

Roland took the hint and made his exit, "Understood, sir." The Airwatch flag officer cut the link from his end and Breen's monitor automatically shut off.

Breen turned back to the other two men in the room. "Now, what do you gentlemen recommend to solve thisâ€¦ problem?" The generals briefly exchanged a concerned glance at the President's nonchalance.

Mikhailovich gestured towards the monitor with his datapad, "May I, sir?"

Breen nodded, "Certainly."

The general synced his datapad with the monitor, duplicating its images on the larger screen. Mikhailovich opened a high-security file and entered a lengthy password. A series of images and videos appeared on the screen, shrunk down to thumbnails, and lined up in rows of three. "This is a chemical weapon fresh from R&D, codenamed ZFX-46." He tapped on one of the video files and it grew to occupy the screen. It began with a cutaway view of some kind of artillery shell. "It combines conventional tear gas with deadly nerve and respiratory agents." The video switched to test-firing footage with Combine soldiers in full hazard gear, "The tear gas disperses upon the shell's impact and disorients those who try to flee. The nerve agent is deployed five seconds later." On the screen, a red cloud began spreading out from the shell, "This nerve gas overloads the target's nervous system, causing major seizures and extreme pain. _If_ there are survivors, the third compound, deployed fifteen seconds post-impact, will finish them off." A yellow haze gradually mixed itself in with the white and red smoke; "This respiratory agent severely constricts an enemy's throat, causing gradual suffocation." The video concluded with perfect timing, right as Mikhailovich finished speaking.

Major General Blake asked, "Are the effectsâ€¦ permanent?"

"According to our tests, no. Once an individual moves outside of the danger zone, the respiratory agent's effects will wear off within minutes; however, that is more than long enough to kill. As for the nerve agent, the pain will cease as the seizures subside. However, the compounds are highly potent; even the smallest exposure will yield symptoms."

Blake protested, "With all due respect, sir, you cannot think of actually using this. Our forces will be just as severely affected as the Resistance!"

Mikhailovich raised a finger, "Yes, I can think of actually using this, for one specific reason: the nerve and respiratory chemicals are inhalants. Gas masks come standard issue for all Civil Protection and infantry forces, and regulations require that equipment to be worn at all times."

"What about my own Special Forces? JSOC doesn't use masks."

Mikhailovich responded, "Your men carry them in their gear packs anyway, if I am informed properly."

President Breen shook his head. "I don't like it. Are there any other options?"

General Mikhailovich dissented, "Mr. President, if you would reconsiderâ€¦"

"That's enough, Conrad."

"Yes, sir."

Breen turned to the other general, "Major General Blake, do you have any recommendations?"

"We could send in Striders," the JSOC commander offered. The Strategic Intervention and Direct Elimination Rig, or 'StrIDER' for short, was a Combine mech. Striders stood on three tall stilt-like legs and were fifty feet high. They had no real 'body'; their pod-like heads were directly attached to their legs. What they lacked in mobility, they made up for in firepower. Each mech was outfitted with a 15mm autocannon in the nose, capable of destroying almost any cover and killing a target in seconds.

President Breen gave his approval, "Deploy the mechs. With luck, that will be enough to drive them off."

"I'll give the order right away, sir."

"Good. You gentlemen are dismissed." Both generals saluted on their way out. Once in the hallway, a pair of white-and-red uniformed honor guards, commonly referred to as "Elites," eyed them all the way to the turbolift, fingers only a hairsbreadth away from their triggers. Elites were trained to consider everyone as a potential threat to their VIP, so even the distinguished generals were regarded with suspicion.

Once the two men were in the elevator, Blake reached to hit the lobby button. Before he could, Mikhailovich's hand shot out and blocked him. With his back to the honor guards, the four-star brought a finger to his lips.

A handful of seconds after the door closed, Blake whispered, "Mikhailovich, what are you doing?"

Mikhailovich responded with his voice at normal levels, "Gas them."

"Sir, the President saidâ€œ"

"I am overriding the President's orders."

"You can't do that! We have explicit instructions, from the _President_!"

"The President is in denial." Mikhailovich took a deep breath before continuing. He never thought these next words would come out of his mouth, "The game has changed, Kyle. The _C.N.V. Razor's Kiss_ has been destroyed. The Resistance and HECU draw closer to the Citadel with every passing hour. We cannot win this battle; City 17 is lost."

Blake was dumfounded at what he was hearing, "You can't really think that!"

"I think that and much more. There is one reason the Resistance is succeeding, and one reason only: me." Mikhailovich hit the button and the lift started its descent.

"What are you saying?"

"Our recent string of victories have rendered me complacent; I have denied time and again the threat our enemies truly pose. My arrogance has led us here, and our forces, neither yours, nor mine can no longer stop the Resistance from annexing our capital. Now, the only thing left to do is kill as many of them as possible before evacuating."

"Sir, disregarding a direct order from the President is punishable by execution."

"We're not disregarding his orders. When I brought up the ZFX-46, he said he 'didn't like it', and that is not an explicit negative."

"Mikhailovich, you know what he meant."

"His words were 'I don't like it', were they not?"

"Yes."

"Then that is merely his opinion, and not a direct order. Do you understand?"

Blake realized the President's words, if taken literally, could easily be twisted. "Yes, sir."

"He did, however, order you to deploy mechanized units. I am merely adding on to those orders."

The JSOC commander was tired of beating around the bush. "Then what are your orders?"

The lift stopped and the doors opened. "Send in the Striders." Mikhailovich put a hand on Blake's shoulder, leaned in close, and whispered in his ear, "And gas them. For good measure." At that, the four-star turned and marched out of the elevator as if the exchange had never taken place. Blake watched him go until the lift's doors cut off his view.

"Aye, aye, sir."

000

"Come on! We've got 'em on the ropes!" The Resistance fighter shot off a burst at the retreating Combine forces and kept running forward with his squad in tow. We were all with them, rebels and marines alike. It was a beautiful sight, really. Enemies turned friends, fighting tooth and nail for a common goal: freedom. The murders, the slavery, the fear—we were going to put a stop to it all.

"_HECU Air Command to Freeman. Do you copy?_"

I double-tapped my earpiece to activate its transmitter. "Air Command, I have you. Go ahead, over."

"_This is Major Kyle. The Citadel's got anti-air in every direction. Flak, plasma, missiles—we my pilots are dropping like flies."_"

"Hold on; we may be able to punch a hole in their

defenses."

"_Negative. I'm losing too many fighters, and it'd be suicide to send helos in open skies. I have to pull the plug on air support."_

I swore inwardly, "Understood. We'll miss those eyes in the sky, Major."

"_I know. We've cleaned up the last of the Airwatch bogeys, but that's all the help we can give you. Air Command, out."_

"Freeman out." I released my earpiece. "Ryan, Alyx, I just got word from the flyboys."

"What's the news?" Alyx asked from my left as her .44 knocked down yet another Combine trooper.

Walker called from my right, "Hold on a sec!" He holstered his USP, whipped out his shotgun and neutralized a pair of CPs who got too close. "Alright, I'm listening."

"They're bugging out."

"What? When we're so close?"

"That's the problem. Citadel's defenses are shredding them."

"Damn it." Alyx gave the sidewalk a tiny kick. "Now we'll have toâ€"

"STRIDER!" The giant five-story mech came around the corner on its stilt-like legs and pulverized a mixed squad of rebels and marines.

Alyx turned around and yelled, "Somebody get me a launcher!"

"I got one," I announced as I pulled the AT-4 laser-guided missile launcher off my back. I flicked the laser sight on and the safety off, and took a knee. "Cover your ears." As soon as I heard the lock-on tone, I fired. The rocket flew straight and true, balanced on a column of fire. It struck the towering Combine mech in the head, causing it to shudder. Instead of falling as it should have, though, it turned towards our merry trio and warbled angrily.

Walker tracked his gaze up to the Strider's head as its main gun heated up, "Well, now you've pissed it off." Alyx and I dove to the left and Walker to the right as a 15mm hellstorm pulverized the concrete where we stood a split-second before. Alyx checked the sights on her revolver once we were in cover again.

"Man, Striders?" She took a peek down the street, "They're getting desperate."

I rolled my shoulders and checked the mag in my M4, "Yeah; we must be close."

Ryan cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted to us, "Hey, Freeman! Vance! Distract that thing!"

We, along with a clutch of Resistance fighters, laid down fire to

draw its attention. As soon as the three-legged mech shifted its attention, Walker made a dash across the street, stopping for the briefest of moments to grab a fallen Resistance member's RPG. Luckily, a warhead was still in the tube.

"Fire in the hole!" He pulled the trigger and the RPG jolted in his hands. The missile flashed down the street, but Walker's aim was a hair high. The warhead streaked past the Strider by mere inches and blasted a crater into the building next to it. Walker's shot drew a groan out of a nearby HECU trooper.

"Nice miss, Combine," he spat, making no attempt to hide the cutting edge in his voice.

"I didn't miss," Ryan answered, confrontation absent from his tone.

Cracks spread through the building's marble walls and support beams. One of the beams gave out, and the others, weakened as they were, couldn't support the building any longer. The eight-story establishment's face tipped ever so slightly in the Strider's direction and gravity took it from there. The mech tilted its head up just before a massive slab of rock crushed two of its legs. A handful of seconds later, another chunk of stone came down and flattened its head.

Ryan stood and dusted off his fatigues. He gave a nod to the marine, and the trooper shook his head and walked off to rejoin his squad.

The double agent jogged back over to us. "Sounds like that was the last wave for now."

I arched an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"Yeah; Overwatch took the bait. Second Battalion is drawing most of their forces to the south."

"Then we need to drop the hammer while they're vulnerable. I'll tell the troops." I started to walk away but Walker grabbed my arm.

"Wait, I'm getting more chatter." He tipped his head down and covered his ears to better hear the voice in his earpiece. As he listened, a panicked look registered on his face. "Oh, no."

Alyx stepped in, concerned. "Ryan, what is it?"

He whirled around and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Gas. They're gassing us, the bastards!"

Seconds after he delivered the news, the first shell landed. Tear gas sprayed out of nozzles in the shell's sides. Those closest to the impact zone coughed and covered their eyes as they stumbled away from the shell. It soon became clear that the tear gas was only a prelude: after a short moment, a second set of vents opened and dispersed a red chemical into the air.

I sprang from cover. "Run! Dammit, run!" We all sprinted away from the shell as fast as we could. The gas floated ominously down the

street as those unaffected by the tear gas scrambled to escape. Some; too many, were too slow. The second the crimson fumes touched them, they dropped and thrashed around as seizures took over their bodies.

"Nerve gas!" The three of us kept running as people fell all around us. I hazarded a backward glance and observed a yellowish haze mixing with the nerve gas. Whatever it was, I didn't want to know what it would do. As we all vaulted over a jersey barrier, I heard gunfire behind us. Single shots, and they weren't whizzing by. I looked back again to see Combine infantry outfitted with hazard gear moving through the gas clouds, executing survivors without so much as a downward glance. Despite our top-speed sprinting, the gas caught up. Alyx stumbled and fell to the ground, coughing as her eyes burned from the tear gas.

"Alyx!" I stopped, grabbed her arm, and pulled her along with me. In the end, I only managed to seal my own fate as well. The white haze of the tear gas swirled around me and I lost all sense of direction. I heard Walker call my name and felt his glove wrap around my wrist. I yelled for him to leave us behind; he was only going to get himself killed too—but then time ground to a halt all around us.

I looked left and right and saw that everything and everyone had stopped moving. Behind me, a nameless Resistance fighter laid facedown in the street, his left arm outstretched in front of him. To my left, on the other side of the street, a pair of HECU troopers pulled each other along. A few meters behind them, a Combine soldier had a kill shot zeroed in.

Walker's voice startled me. "Freeman, what _is _this?" Then it hit me: he was also somehow aware and able to move freely, unbound by the temporal freeze-frame.

I shifted my M4 against my shoulder. "I don't know—but be ready."

We heard footsteps coming from inside the gas cloud and brought our weapons to bear. A man walked out of the smoke and looked at our weapons as if they were sticks and stones. He wore a navy blue suit with a white dress shirt and tie, and carried a steel briefcase in his right hand. His dark brown dress shoes clicked against the pavement as he moved toward us. His graying sideburns betrayed his age, but his light blue eyes were the last item that confirmed his identity: he was the same man I met at Black Mesa twenty years ago.

"Greetings, Dr. Freeman."

I tightened my grip on my carbine. "You," I spat, "What do you want now?"

He ignored me, turning instead to Ryan. "Mr. Walker—you have indeed proven to be full of surprises. So much potential only recently unlocked. That is why my clients have become interested in you as well."

I stepped between them. "You leave Walker out of this."

Walker lowered his shotgun. "Wait. You're the guy I talked to when

the AFI recruited me."

The man's lips lifted ever so slightly but there was no warmth in his smile. "Yes; very perceptive." He turned back to me. "Let me assure you, Dr. Freeman, that I am here this time strictly for your benefit. No strings attached."

I eyed him suspiciously. "I find that very hard to believe."

His lips thinned and he exhaled through his nose. "If it were not for my intervention, all three of you would have succumbed to the gas. That alone should be evidence enough for you but your trust in me is ultimately inconsequential. Your time has not come yet" he motioned to Alyx, "and neither has hers. You and Ms. Vance will need each other in the coming war, and as such, I cannot allow you to pass in this way." He smiled again, and the gesture was still emotionless. "No thanks are required, Dr. Freeman. I will see you again in due time." He turned around and walked back into the gas and out of sight.

Walker asked, "Who was that guy, and why is he helping us?"

I realized that after twenty years, I still had no idea who or what he was. "I really don't know, but we should get going. Things are moving again." He agreed and we started running as time gradually sped back up around us. I had to forcefully pull Alyx with me to keep us ahead of the gas. Seconds later time had reached its normal rate, as had the sounds of gunfire and panic. As we ran, though, Walker noticed something was different.

"Freeman, wait. The gas it stopped." I threw a look over my shoulder and skidded to a stop. The billowing red and yellow cloud looked as if it had hit a wall, pushing at an unseen barrier but not growing any closer. Ryan leaned in. "Do you think?" He trailed off before he finished his sentence, sensing that it was a bad idea to mention our acquaintance out loud.

First Battalion gradually came to a stop as word spread about the gas. A dozen Resistance members formed a firing line in case any Combine soldiers came out of the haze. When a few of them did, they were shot with extreme prejudice. Realizing they were at a significant tactical disadvantage, the remaining specialists pulled back.

I turned around, realized I still held Alyx's arm, and let go. She bent down, rested her hands on her knees, and coughed vigorously. "Hey, are you okay?" I asked, concerned.

She nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I just need a minute."

I turned to our AFI double agent. "Walker, what the hell was that stuff?"

He clenched his fist. "It's called ZFX-46. Experimental and highly dangerous. It's delivered with shells and combines tear gas with nerve and respiratory compounds. I don't know what the last two are made of; even I don't have that kind of security clearance."

"Do we need chem suits?"

"No; it's inhalant-only. And the HECU has plenty of gas masks."

I relayed Walker's intel to the rest of the Resistance fighters and volunteered to be the first one in. After the expected protests from Alyx, an HECU medic handed me his green-lensed gas mask. I slid the device over my face, tightened the straps and pressurized it. I gave them a thumbs-up and walked into the red cloud of death. The gas enveloped me, but I didn't seize up like the others had. I was about to radio an all clearâ€¦

And then I saw the bodies.

There were too many. Resistance, HECU, even Combine troopers who weren't wearing proper equipment. All were horribly twisted and contorted from seizures and suffocation. I looked down and saw a dead Resistance fighter inches from my boots. His legs were kicked out to the sides, hands clamped around his throat, eyes staring at the sky. An HECU marine laid facedown on the pavement just past him and had an iron grip on the back of the fighter's collar. As I took in the horrible scene, I saw several more instances of the same scenario, men futilely trying to pull their friends and comrades to safety. I shifted my gaze to the right and saw something I would never forget. There was a boy; he couldn't have been older than fourteen. His rifle seemed large and awkward in his grip, and his jacket was too big. His brown eyes still bulged as they held me in their lifeless gaze.

I took a step back. "Oh God." War really did take no prisoners.

"_Gordon?"_ It was Alyx. "_Gordon, are you alright?"_

I forced myself to snap out of it. "Come on through. It's safe." She didn't seem to notice I had dodged her question.

"_Okay, we're coming through now."_

Soon I heard the sound of engines, tires and boots. As the first of the vehicles rolled slowly by, an HECU trooper stopped next to me. I couldn't see his face through his mask, but was able to identify him by his nametag and the silver oak leaves on his collar.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Strickland," I said by way of greeting.

He nodded, "Freeman." We both spent the next few moments looking over the tangled bodies littered around the street until he broke the silence, "How many do you think are out there?" he asked, gesturing to our fallen brethren.

I shook my head. "I don't knowâ€¦ but I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For getting you into this mess. I asked you and your men to lay down your lives for a cause that isn't your own. Your people are dying for mine, and it isn't right. For that, Strickland, I'm sorry."

He turned towards me, "Freeman, look at me." I did. "It is right, because this is our fight too, just as much as it is yours. Each and every one of us knew what we were getting into, but we all came

anyway."

"Why?"

"Because we won't sit back and let you take all the punches. Because we will stand strong and fight like hell for a better tomorrow. Because together, we'll kick in the front door and smash those totalitarian motherfuckers until there's nothing left but a bad memory."

"Then I'm glad you came along for the ride."

"And what a hell of a ride it's been. We're so close, Freeman. One last push is all it's going to take." With that, he marched off to join his forces.

"Yeah," I agreed under my breath as I hailed down a passing Humvee and jumped on the side skirts. "One last push."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Hey guys and girls, remember my AN on Chapter 13? The one that said I would finish this before summer's end? Yeeeeeeaaaahâ€| that's obviously not happening, but I swear to God I will finish this!

Okay, second item on the listâ€| gamertags. I would love to connect with you over Steam or Xbox Live, so look up "SergeantLawson" on the Xbox, and "Sergeant Lawson" (note the space this time) on Steam. I look forward to hearing from you. Right guys? Right? Helloâ€|? *sniffle* It gets so lonely out here on the interwebs.

Now to start writing Chapter 15. *cracks neck* A'ight, let's get to it.

Cheers!

SergeantLawson

15. Our Benefactors

Chapter 15: Our Benefactors

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** Well, ladies and gentlemenâ€| here we are. It has taken two long years (I started posting when I finished chapter 4), but here we are. I've abandoned and restarted this project _four_ times, but here we are. And why are we here? What has carried us this far? You. Yes, you. _You_ are the one who has stuck with me this far. _You_ are the one who made some of these last chapters the way they are. Along the ride we have run from a militarized police force, engaged in a waterborne high-speed chase, watched thousands of our friends die from a MAC strike, battled tooth-and-nail to free the last remnants of the U.S. military, laid siege to a capital, and brought down a Combine flagship. Now, finally, it's time. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to youâ€| the conclusion of _Uprising_.

000

****Six Hours Laterâ€|****

On the West side of the Citadel, Lieutenant-Colonel Strickland tightened the straps on his harness and tugged on the attached rope. _Two tours in Iraq and a third in Afghanistan. Seen a lot of crazy stuff, but fast roping over a hundred meters, hoping there's a platform below, and entrusting my life to twenty-year old aircraft cable?_ The veteran shook his head. _I hope Freeman knows what he's doing._

Strickland turned to the five marines with him, all of whom were also hitched up. They all gave him a thumbs-up. "Cobra Team in position. Over."

Alyx reported from the tower's North side, _"Viper Team in position. We're ready whenever you are, over."_

I checked in from the South side as I looked down into the ominous pit. "Scorpion Team here. Ready to end this." I paused before continuing. "Okay, let's go over this one more time. We hit them from three sides at the same time. On the way, each team has targets to hit. Alyx, you and Viper shut down their gunship production, permanently if you can. Strickland, we need Cobra to cripple their response time: take the command center on your route and neutralize the alarms. Scorpion and I will knock out the exterior defenses so we can get our pilots back in the air. Everyone clear?"

"_Five-by-five, Gordon."_

"_Roger that."_

I gave them one last reminder: "Expect comm loss. I'd be optimistic if I said there's a one-in-a-million chance our signals can penetrate those walls. Remember that means once we're in, we have no outside backup. Don't even rely on the other two teams: if one squad slips up, it's eighteen of us against hundreds of angry Combine soldiers."

"_We can handle it, Freeman."_

"I know. Ready?"

"_Affirmative."_

"_Yeah."_

I closed my eyes and took a breath. "Good luck. To all of you." Another breath came before I counted down to the mission's start. "Threeâ€| Twoâ€| Oneâ€| Go, go, go!"

I wrapped my hands around the aircraft cable, jumped off the side, and plunged into the darkness. The six of us found purchase on various footholds in the rock face and started walking our way down the side of the cliff. After a good minute of rappelling, I grew worried we were going too deep.

"Lights," I ordered. My five companions turned on their halogen beams and swept them across the seemingly endless chasm. One of the men stopped as his flashlight played over a catwalk.

"Hey, I see something! Looks like a service corridor or something."

Rather conveniently, it was right beneath us. "I'll go down first. Once I touch down, swing over and follow me." I pushed myself off the wall and rode the cable down to the steel catwalk. Seconds later, my squad touched down behind me. The six of us quickly made the journey across the narrow path to the Citadel itself. I stopped at the edge of the doorway and the squad lined up behind me.

"Breach and clear, sir?" asked the rebel behind me as she unclipped a flashbang from her belt.

I shook my head. "No. Someone give me a cam cable." One of the men fished a fiber-optic cable out of his pack and passed it up the line. I synched it to my HUD and carefully fed the wire around the corner and through the doorway. The camera turned and tilted with my head as I slowly craned my neck from left to right. Our entry was clear of enemy personnel, but I stopped when I looked up.

I sighed. "Damn."

"Problem, sir?" breathed one of my men.

I whispered, "Looks like two ceiling turrets. Can't see a clear way through."

"What now?"

I tapped a few buttons on my suit's wrist-mounted control pad. "Now we hope the program Captain Vance gave me works." My hover fingered over the execute button as I gave a brief explanation, "It should kill the turrets for about half a minute without attracting any attention."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"Then we'll have to make our way through the planet's most heavily guarded military installation with almost a thousand Combine personnel shooting at us."

"Oh."

"Okay, I'm executing in five. Get ready." I counted down in my head, took a breath, and hit the button. On my camera feed, the sentry guns powered upâ€"

â€"And died a second later.

I locked the bolt on my M4. "On my markâ€| go!" We stormed in, took the room without incident, and kept moving. Once around a corner and safely out of the turrets' line of fire, we all stopped and caught our breath.

"Well," one of the rebels remarked as she rolled her neck, "That went better than expected."

000

A Combine technician sipped his coffee at his workstation as a

facility-wide systems check ran on his computer. Suddenly, the speakers chirped and a red-lettered window popped up on his screen.

"The hell?" His trained eyes skimmed the system report as he simultaneously jotted down the nature and location of the problem. "Lieutenant? Sir?" he called.

His supervisor strode over and leaned on his desk. "Yes, Corporal?"

"Sir, I might have something here. A couple of sentry guns just missed the automated check-in. Sector M, Level 40â€¦ looks like a maintenance corridor."

The LT rubbed his chin and shook his head. "I don't like it. Thank you, Corporal, I'll take care of it."

"Roger that, sir." The tech resumed his work and the lieutenant stepped outside into the hallway. The officer pressed two fingers to his earpiece.

"This is Engineering Station Two supervisor, calling security. Come in, over." He paused as he waited for a reply. "Yes, Major, this is Lieutenant Valern, Engineering. I may have a situation in Sector M, Level 40. We're showing two dead turrets; can you send a QRF squad to check it out? Thank you, sir. Valern out."

000

We slowed our pace as we neared our target area. Everyone's heads were on swivels, and the tension couldn't have been higher. Finally, after what seemed like ages, we laid eyes on the defense control center. There was no way we would get in here without getting our hands dirty, so I did what I could to guarantee us a quick entrance.

"Silencers on," I whispered. Everyone complied and threaded on their suppressors. I then put three of the rebels on the guard to the left of the door, and the other three on the guard at right. I raised my hand and counted down from five on my fingers. The instant I hit zero, the two Combine soldiers slumped against the wall with three bullets in their heads.

"Follow me and stay low." I took off for the room across the hall with Scorpion in tow. I opened the door, thanked the gods above for the lack of enemy personnel within, and ordered the rest of the squad to file inside. The last man in shut the door, and I set to work at the computers.

"Catch your breath and check your gear," I advised as I ran my suit's cracking matrix. Endless randomized access codes blurred across the screen much faster than I could hope to keep up with. After about half a minute, I heard a triple tone come from the monitors. "Okay, I'm in." I pulled the chair closer to the keyboard and got busy. I shifted through over a dozen windows, searching for my quarry. The fruits of my labor paid off in the form of full access to the Citadel's anti-air defense network. From there, it was as easy as flipping off a couple of light switches.

And then all hell broke loose.

The Citadel's AI came over the PA system, _"Threat Level Red! Threat Level Red! Intruder alert! This is not a drill! Hostile elements detected in Sectors M, J, and F. All combat personnel report for duty! Threat Level Red!"_

The computer screens died, as well as the lights. "No, no, no!" I frantically clicked and typed, but it was no use.

"Ah, dammit, I can't see a thing. We need to get out of here." That was the best suggestion I had heard all day.

"Agreed. Plan B, everyone. We make a run for theâ€"

The door opened and a gloved hand tossed something inside. Three and a half seconds later, noxious fumes spread throughout the room.

"Tear gas!" We all covered our mouths and eyes, to no avail. The door swung open again; fully this time, and an enemy squad came in. I had been tear-gassed many times before and had built up something of an immunity to it, and that was what saved our lives. When the Combine QRF guys appeared, I managed to put them down despite the blurriness in my eyes. We all then moved out into the hall and coughed the disorienting chemicals out of our lungs.

"Everyone okay?" I asked. The men present responded with nods of the head, except for one. "Where's Polaski?"

A rebel shook his head. "She caught one in the neck."

I grit my teeth and cursed inwardly. "At least the air defenses are down. Let's go." My four remaining squadmates shouldered their weapons and formed up behind me.

"What's the plan, sir?"

"Same as before; meet up with Viper and Cobra at the central lift. Only nowâ€|"

"Now we have just under a thousand Combine soldiers in our way."

"Right."

We forged ahead, hell-bent on reaching our destination. Another man fell under a hail of bullets, but we couldn't stop. Six minutes and twenty enemies later, our target came into view.

"Come on, move! We're almost there!" I had spoken too soon: right as we were about to cross the threshold, an incandescent plasma field blocked our passage and forced us down a side corridor. I analyzed the situation and quickly got to the bottom of their strategy. They had full control over internal shielding, so they could (and would) funnel us around until we couldn't fight anymore.

And it was working. Despite our perpetual adrenaline rushes and intense physical training, our strength was wearing thin, as was our ammunition. Before long, two of us, including me, had switched to

our sidearms.

"We can't keep this up much longer!"

I kicked a shotgun-toting engineer in the sternum and shot him in the throat. "Just keep fighting! I'll find us a way out of this!" To tell the truth, I knew we were effectively screwed. My only aim at this point was to put down as many of the enemy as I could to give the second wave an easier time. Even that proved to be a useless effort, though.

As we were rounding yet another corner, a trio of sentry guns popped out of the ceiling and blasted away my two remaining friends. However, they didn't shoot me. That told me one thing: surrender or die. Armed only with a handgun, I knew I would lose if I tried to fight a collective fire rate of three thousand rounds per minute. For the first time in years, I dropped my weapon and raised my hands. In seconds, a special ops squad came through a door and surrounded me.

The last thing I felt was a rifle stock connecting with my temple.

000

I came to on the floor of my original destination: the central lift. Irony was the last thing on my mind, however, as I saw Alyx and Strickland hovering over me.

"Gordon, are you okay?" Alyx demanded urgently.

I grunted and nodded. "I think so. Jesus, my headâ€¦"

Strickland edged in. "Let me see." He leaned in to get a better look at the side of my head. "Mmh, doesn't look too bad. It's a bleeder, but you'll be fine."

"What the hell happened?"

Alyx responded, "Everyone else is dead. Strickland and I got captured; looks like the same thing happened to you." Despite the cuffs, she was able to awkwardly help me up.

I noted the pull of gravity; that meant the lift was ascending. "Where do you think they're taking us?"

Strickland shrugged. "My best guess is to the man himself." That sent my mind racing. Unspoken words flew between Alyx and I, and at that moment I knew we were thinking the same thing. The President's office was bound to have full access to all systems. If only I could find a way to get Alyx on his computer, she could wreak some serious havoc. Ironing out any kind of plan was too risky with a veteran squad of Combine specialists around us though, so we would have to wing it.

The lift slowed at the top of the shaft and came to a gentle stop. The doors parted with a hiss, revealing none other than the treacherous Dr. Judith Mossman on the other side. She had her red hair tied into a bun and was wearing a black skirt that stopped just above her knees, a white buttoned dress shirt with the top two clasps

undone, and a pair of black heels. I glared at her with enough mental force to melt titanium. Mossman, in turn, seemed to be very interested with my boots.

"There was no other way," she said just above a whisper, "I'mâ€| sorry, Gordon."

General Mikhailovich walked up and stood beside her. "Judith," he said with a sideways nod.

"Conrad," Mossman replied flatly, refusing eye contact with him as well.

Mikhailovich locked eyes with the soldier behind me and gave him a curt nod. "Move," ordered the trooper as he shoved me with his SCAR. They marched us out of the lift and a short ways down the hall before stopping in front of an obviously important door: two honor guard "Elites" stood at either side of the entrance, outfitted with the latest weapons and gear. One of the JSOC men stepped in front of us and opened the door. Inside was none other than the President's office.

The door took us in at the left side of the room, and the first thing I noticed was the blood-red carpet. I looked to my right and saw something odd: the decorations ended abruptly a few feet before the wall, with a heavy-duty reinforced door behind it. I noted that as a possible escape route. To my left was President Breen's dark oak desk, and in the stuffed leather chair behind it, the man himself. Breen's snow-white hair was neatly combed, but unlike in his propaganda videos, his beard was gone. He wore a grey two-piece suit with a white shirt, charcoal black tie, and brown dress shoes. The President's expression was calm and neutral as he sat patiently at his chair. His forearms rested on his desk, fingers loosely interlaced. He looked as though he had been expecting us.

After Alyx, Strickland, Mossman, General Mikhailovich and I filed in, the special ops team promptly departed, leaving us in the middle of the room. The white-uniformed Elites remained with us, rooted at either side of the door.

Breen nodded at the guards. "Thank you, gentlemen. You may go." At his orders the Elites both snapped to attention, saluted, and marched outside. Once the door closed, Breen stood from his chair.

He bid the four of us greetings, to which no one responded, save for Mikhailovich. "I would ask you to sit, butâ€|" He gestured at the room's lack of chairs.

"I'll stand, thank you," said Alyx mockingly.

Breen walked around the side of his desk and up to me. "Dr. Gordon Freemanâ€| I must say you never cease in surprising me. If I had known you would march right up to my office, I never would have bothered hunting you in the first place."

"You weren't hunting me," I asserted coldly, "You were exterminating everyone aligned against you, not to mention plenty of innocent civilians."

Mikhailovich spun and roared, "Hold your tongue, rebel!"

Breen gave the general the slightest gesture, subtly shutting Mikhailovich down. "Freeman, if you are referring to the gas, let me assure you that was all due to a€ misunderstanding in the chain of command."

It was easy to read between the lines, but I wouldn't let him shunt the blame. "It's not just about the gas. It's about Black Mesa East, Nova Prospekt, and everything else. You've gone too far!"

"Nonsense," he replied, "I engineered the treaty two decades ago, and I have kept the peace ever since." Mossman casually walked behind the President and to his desk. "I do what I do for humanity's best interests."

I shot back, "You don't get to decide humanity's best interests! That's what democracy is for! You've become a dictator." I pointed out the window. "Billions of people out there live in constant fear for their lives every day! Some go days without eating! And what does Civil Protection do amid all this? Beat them half to death, throw them out of their homes and leave them to rot!" I took a breath to steady my mind, "This can end two ways, and I don't believe there is any need for me to outline them."

Mossman stepped forward from her spot and took short strides up to the President. "May I, sir?"

He nodded, and Mossman moved behind his desk and opened a drawer. Breen shifted his attention back to me. "No, Freeman, I am afraid there is only one. Whatever you thought you would accomplish here, I can assure you it will not take place. General Mikhailovich, escort them out."

Dr. Mossman finally spoke, "I don't think so." We all turned to see her behind the President's desk, training Breen's personal handgun on its owner.

"Judith! What are you doing?" Breen stammered, calm forgotten.

Mikhailovich drew his own pistol. "Drop it, Mossman!"

With the general distracted, Alyx took action. She lunged for the door controls and slammed her elbow into the panel, locking it shut. Outside, the honor guards pounded and pounded to no avail.

Mossman answered, "I'm doing what I could never do alone: stopping you."

The general thundered, "I said drop the gun!"

Now it was Strickland's turn. The marine moved behind the general and struck him at the back of the neck. Mikhailovich's weapon left his grip and slid across the room. Alyx stopped it with her boot and picked it up. She made her way back to us, holding General Mikhailovich at gunpoint all the while. The senior officer slowly backed away from her, hands out to steady her trigger finger.

"Now, now," he said, his voice finally wavering, "I'm sure there's a

way to salvage this situation!" His words fell on deaf ears.

Alyx shifted her aim to something behind the general. "You." she spat with venom, "Get off my planet."

I realized what she intended to do. "Everybody down!"

Alyx pulled the trigger, and the window behind Mikhailovich shattered. The general screamed as decompression carried him out the window amid a cloud of glass. His cries didn't stop until he was well out of our view and on his way down to the surface. A split-second after Mikhailovich flew out of the office, the safety force field kicked in and created a secondary window, pressurizing the room and keeping us inside. Breen made a run for it. In response, Mossman cracked off two shots but missed.

I held my hand out to block her line as Breen ran through the reinforced door. "Hold your fire; we need him alive!"

"Got it." Mossman moved back behind Breen's desk and pulled up a chair. She set Breen's pistol down on the desk, powered up the President's computer and entered his password. "I'll have the defenses down in a few minutes."

Right on cue, a small shower of sparks came from the bottom of the doorframe and slowly moved up. The guards were cutting through. "We might not have a few minutes," Strickland warned.

I wasted no time in devising a plan of action. "Strickland, take Breen's gun and cover her. Alyx, you're with me; we're going after the President."

Alyx checked her pistol's mag and locked a round in the chamber. "Let's go!"

We ran through the door and the chase was on. I caught the tail end of Breen's grey suit whipping around the corner as I threw the hatch open. Alyx and I redoubled our pace to close the distance. When we rounded the corner ourselves, we saw Breen disappear behind a pair of elevator doors.

"Dammit!" Alyx shouted as we skidded to a stop. "We were so close!"

"Get that door open! I'll have a look around here."

"You could say please," she responded as she drew a flathead screwdriver out of her boot and pried off the control panel. Meanwhile, I occupied myself searching the room for anything useful. Somewhere in the interim, I heard a sizzling pop followed by a muttered expletive from Alyx. After a few useless moments, I remembered yet another useful feature my suit carried: the millimeter scanner, or MMS. In short, the device would allow me to see through certain surfaces from a short distance. I activated the MMS, and before long revealed a false panel in the wall.

I grinned, "Aperture Science, eat your heart out." It only took a second of feeling around to find the button and secure victory. My prize: two P90 submachine guns, each with two magazines. I took one and delivered the other to Alyx, just as she finished her own work.

The elevator doors neatly partedâ€¦ revealing a hundred-foot drop.

"Great," she vocalized, "Any idea how we're gonna get through _this_?"

"Come on, why all the doom and gloom?" I leapt into the shaft and grabbed one of the lift's cables. "See you at the bottom!" Thanks to my Kevlar-woven gauntlets, I didn't have to worry about six-inch metal slivers destroying my flesh. Alyx, though, had no such luxury.

"Showoff," she grumbled as she made the climb down the maintenance ladder.

President Breen had nowhere to run. I knew this as I closed the distance between us at the Citadel's summit. There was no escape shuttle waiting: the only aircraft in the air were the HECU jets that constantly screamed by, daring any pockets of Combine defenders to reveal themselves.

"Breen, stop!"

"Freeman, you and your band of insurgents have succeeded in engineering the downfall of society. Now there is only one thing left to do." The President whirled around, with a second gun in handâ€¦ pointed directly at me.

Alyx, President Breen, and I all fired at the same time.

I felt a tearing pain as Breen's bullet sliced across the side of my neck. Since I wasn't on the ground bleeding to death, I knew that no major arteries had been broken, and that the wound was minor. There was only one reason I had not taken a direct hit in the throat: luck. The President, however, had not been so lucky. He laid motionless on the other side of Helipad 16, motionless from six gunshots to the chest.

Alyx managed to speak after a good long moment. "Weâ€¦ we did it, didn't we?"

"Yes," I replied with a smile, "We certainly did."

000

****AUTHOR'S NOTE:**** We certainly did, Freeman. We certainly did. This, however, is just the beginning. I have the plotline for a full-length sequel in my head that I've been dying to write. Soon, we will follow Freeman through Episode One, Episode Two, and beyond. For now, though, I must bid you farewell. I need to take a step back for a month or two and really flesh things out before I do anything. This is SergeantLawson, signing off.

Cheers!

SergeantLawson

****Epilogue****

****Two days later; at City 17 Civil Protection Headquarters****

A knock came at my door and a rebel stuck her head into my new quarters. "Colonel Freeman? We're ready, sir."

I nodded, "Thank you." I gave myself a once-over in the mirror. God, I hated dress uniforms and speeches and being in charge overall. But those things were part of my job now; with Eli gone and our chain of command shot to pieces from the assault on Black Mesa East, I was the new leader of the Resistance. And everyone wanted to hear what I had to say. I shook those thoughts from my mind as I clipped my mic to my tie, smoothed a wrinkle out of my sleeve, and left my quarters.

The applause was deafening as I opened the double doors to the outside world, and I had to squint for a few seconds to let my eyes adjust to the sunlight. I gave the cheering crowd a lengthy wave as I looked them over. Rebels and marines stood together, filling Civil Protection Headquarters' courtyard and a few streets beyond. Most were on solid ground, but a few here and there stood atop tanks, Humvees and other vehicles. I held up my hands and silence gradually enveloped the crowd. It struck me as humorous that I was the only one who knew I had no speech prepared. I liked it better that way; it ensured my words came straight from the heart.

"I want to start by honoring each and every one of you for your bravery, your courage, and your sacrifice. I know some of you have lost loved ones along the way; husbands, wives, sons, daughters. Let me assure you that they did not die in vain! They died so we could be free!" I paused to allow the applause to run its course. "The past week has been hell for all of us, but we have seen the light at the end of the tunnel. Not only did we bring down a flagship; we marched on the Combine Washington D.C. and took over the White House!" Again, I stopped to let the applause taper off. "We have shown them that we will not back down, that we will fight for our freedom, and that we will never stop until we take our planet back!"

"I will admit we would not be here today without the assistance of a third faction. The HECU, those last brave men of the United States Marine Corps, brought enough firepower to even the sides and crammed it all right down the Combine's throats! I consider them all my brothers in arms but one very special marine is not here with us today. That man is Colonel Adrian Shephard.

"Twenty years ago, we held each other at gunpoint. Despite our past, he swore to bring everything he had to the table, and that he did. Shephard was able to see past our differences and look toward a better future. He bought enough time for his men to finish the job on the Razor's Kiss and finally turn the tides in our favor. The HECU are not our friends. They are not our allies. Instead, they have joined us as a single force, fighting for freedom across the planet. We have shown the Combine that we truly are a force to be reckoned with! We have not only killed the President; we have also cut the head off the Overwatch General Army! This past week, we have shown them that whatever they do to us, we will give back tenfold! If they start a fight, we will finish it! If they throw a punch, we will knock them

out! This global dictatorship must be stopped! If you are with me, raise your fist!"

The explosive waves of cheers and pumping fists gave exponentially more volume to our cause than my speech ever could. After a good long moment, I gave the crowd another wave, did an about-face and walked back inside.

A familiar voice called out to me as I was making my way down the hall. "Gordon!"

I turned my head and stopped. "Barney?"

The former CP snaked his way through a group of chatting rebels and caught up to me. "Thorn wants to see you."

I snorted. "Christ. Just when I thought I could go a day without killing someone."

"Take my advice, Gordon. Let me handle the comedy."

"Who said I was joking?"

000

The rebel guarding the interrogation room snapped to attention as we approached. Barney pushed open the door and we both entered. City 17's former police commissioner stood facing the wall at the other side of the room.

I cleared my throat. "Thorn. You say you have something I want?"

"No," he said with a grin as he turned around to face us, "I have something you need."

I pulled a chair away from the table and sat down. "Please, take a seat." Thorn saw no reason to argue and did as I asked.

Like myself, Barney wanted to spend the absolute minimum amount of time possible with this tyrant. "Well? What do you have that we need?"

"Information. Military code ciphers, squad-based infantry tactics, base locationsâ€¦" he tapped two fingers to his temple, "They're all housed right here, and I can give them to you."

So quick to sell out his own people just to climb a notch on the totem pole. His offer would have been tempting, if not for one thing. "Hate to cut your lifeline short, Commissioner, but we've already got access to all the classified files we'll ever need. See, we have the Citadel under our control. It's only a matter of time before we break the encryption keys, and when we doâ€¦ well, let's just say your ship is already sinking under your feet."

"No, wait! You need me!"

I stood, marched around the side of the table, and leaned in nice and close. "Get comfortable, Colin. You're going to die in a cell the size of this room." I pushed myself off the table and cocked my head

at Barney. "Calhoun, let's go."

I was halfway out the door when Thorn shouted two very interesting words. "Elysium Station!"

Barney and I stopped. "What?"

"Elysium Station! It's beyond top secret! You can count the number of people who know about it on one hand!"

Now that got my attention. Barney let the door close as we re-entered the room. "Start talking."

000

****2230 Hours, Aboard the **_**CNV Iron Fist**_** [LOCATION CLASSIFIED]****

Fleet Admiral Karen Frasier once again looked disapprovingly at her new left arm. The damage Shephard's grenade had done was too great to fix, and so the corpsmen, with her reluctant approval, had instead opted for a prosthetic limb. The faux arm they had given her was nothing like the fragile models of old, though. Her new limb was full of cutting-edge technology and encased in a synthetic Titanium shell; it was actually better than the flesh and bone from before. Still, she would have preferred the arm she had been born with, but the corpsmen insisted the transition was mandatory.

A knock at her door interrupted her thoughts. "Come."

The door rose into the ceiling with a hiss, revealing the ship's Chief Medical Officer. "Admiral? She's waking up."

Frasier leaned over to grab her datapad from her desk before following the CMO out the door. "I presume all went well, Commander?"

The medical chief walked and talked. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, showing her the various anatomical displays on his datapad's screen, "Herâ€| most severe injury resulted in total paralysis from the neck down, not to mention the internal bleeding from the others. Even three years ago this condition would be irreversible, but not so with the medical technology at our disposal." He needed not point out that same technology had produced the admiral's prosthetic.

"It worked, then? Impressive," Frasier remarked with a nod.

"That's not all. You are familiar with the modifications JSOC makes to its juggernauts, I presume?"

"Yes."

"We have improved upon them, thanks in no small part to the millions of credits the Navy has funneled our way. Not only did we manage to reactivate her nervous system, we managed to fine-tune it. Her previous reaction time was 162 milliseconds; if our tests are correct, we have reduced it to 118. We have also increased her muscle-fiber density to facilitate greater speed and force, and reinforced her bones with carbon fiber accordingly. One of my ophthalmologists even managed to improve her eyesight and give her

far above-average night vision."

"Impressive indeed."

"Yes, ma'am. She was already one of the best, if not _the_ best. With our additions, she's faster, stronger, more intelligentâ€|"

"So, physically, she is in exemplary condition?"

"With all due respect, ma'am, I believe that is an understatement." They stopped outside the patient's door and he added, "Here we are."

"Mentally, though? Has her personality or psyche suffered in any way? You know very well, Commander, that any adverse side effects can entirely offset an individual. I did not spend millions to bring her back just to have her forget why she is fighting."

The CMO cracked a thin smile, "I'll just say you should see for yourself, and leave it at that."

Frasier laid a hand on the doorknob. "Very well. Thank you, Commander," she said in polite dismissal. The CMO saluted and left, and Frasier opened the door.

"I _said_, I'm fine," an irritated voice deadpanned from within, which Admiral Frasier immediately associated with the patient.

"Ma'am, please, you need to lie down," insisted one of the med techs. A second corpsman turned and spotted the Chief of Naval Operations.

"Admiral on deck!" He immediately snapped to attention where he stood and his comrades followed suit.

The CNO replied, "Please clear the room, Lieutenant." The LT had never heard an admiral say please before, or even a captain for that matter. However, the man was smart enough to know that in this case the word meant the exact opposite of its definition. All four corpsmen grabbed their gear and filed out of the room double-quick.

Admiral Frasier strode over to the woman on the bed. Her Navy-issue tee-shirt was exactly the same shade as her jet black hair, both of which made her dark blue eyes stand out even more than they normally did.

"Commander Thatcher. How are you feeling?"

Thatcher sat up, swung her legs off the side of the hospital bed, and stood with her back to the admiral. Frasier let her; she knew her own limitations. "Better than ever," she said, flexing her fingers, "Damn if it isn't good to be alive."

"I am very glad to hear that."

Thatcher turned her head to her superior, "Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

Frasier blinked. "Certainly."

The commander pivoted fully to face her counterpart and locked eyes with her. "It's time for some goddamned payback."

End
file.